

Department of Political Science  
Bachelor's Degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics

Chair: Sociology of Terrorism

## **Lone Wolf Terrorists: Competing Perspectives**

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter One</b> .....	<b>4</b>
1.1 The relevance of lone wolf terrorists .....	4
1.2 Competing definitions of the lone wolf phenomenon .....	7
1.3 Empirical studies on lone actors .....	9
1.4 Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaij’s database on lone wolves’ background factors and motivations .....	10
1.5 Analogy between lone wolves and terrorist organizations .....	12
1.6 Locus (places) of radicalization of lone actors .....	14
1.7 Radicalization Model of Lone Wolf Terrorism .....	16
<b>Chapter Two</b> .....	<b>19</b>
2. Introduction .....	19
2.1 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko on the individual mechanisms of radicalization .....	19
2.1.1 Two-pyramids model of radicalization .....	22
2.1.2 Lone wolves’ self-sacrifice .....	24
2.2 Objections to the presumed solitude of lone wolves .....	26
2.2.1 Research on the relational dynamics of lone actor extremists .....	28
<b>Chapter Three</b> .....	<b>31</b>
3. Introduction .....	31
3.1 Carlos Leon Bledsoe and the Little Rock Military Shooting .....	31
3.1.1 Further analysis of the case study .....	35
3.2 Brenton Harrison Tarrant and the Christchurch terror attack .....	36
3.2.1 Shortcomings of law enforcement agencies and counterterrorism bodies in detecting attacks .....	38
3.2.2 Coordinating and preventing future lone wolves attacks .....	39
3.3 Similarities between Islamist-Jihadist and Right-Wing Extremist ideologies .....	41
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b>Sintesi</b> .....	<b>50</b>

## Introduction

This undergraduate dissertation aims at analysing the phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism in the context of radicalization and terrorism studies. The research is based upon the examination and comparison of the existent literature on the theme, which is finally applied to specific instances of lone wolf terrorists.

The first chapter begins by recalling the relevance of the phenomenon, considering a study conducted by terrorism scholar Alessandro Orsini, demonstrating that most of the recent terrorist attacks have been carried out increasingly at the hands of lone actors rather than by terrorist organizations. Based on a well-known book written by terrorism experts Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij on the topic, a systematic analysis is then offered of the most prominent scholarly work on lone wolves, beginning with the competing definitions of the phenomenon, proceeding to the examination of the characteristics and background factors of these individuals and to their dissimilarities with terrorist organizations. The chapter ends with the presentation of the radicalization model of lone wolf terrorists proposed by Hamm and Spaaij.

The second chapter exposes the psychological processes undergone by lone actor extremists, in accordance with the theories of scholars Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko. First of all, the mechanisms of single-actor radicalization are described in detail, followed by the distinction made by the authors between the mere possession of a radical ideology and the actual engagement in acts of political violence, which are not necessarily consequential. This differentiation serves the purpose of identifying distinct types of lone wolves. Lastly, the factors which lead these individuals and suicide bombers to sacrifice themselves for a broader political cause are put forward. In the final section of the chapter, the criticisms to McCauley and Moskalenko's point of view as well as to the common understanding of lone wolves are discussed, urging the necessity to redefine the motives of this phenomenon.

Finally, the third chapter is devoted to the illustration of two practical instances of lone wolf terrorists, through the application of the theoretical models explained in the previous chapters. The first case study examines the experience of Carlos Leon Bledsoe, the terrorist who realized the Little Rock military shooting on May 9, 2009. The second, instead, exposes the Christchurch terror attack carried out by Brenton Harrison Tarrant on March 15, 2019, through a report conducted by Boaz Ganor, a renowned Israeli terrorism expert. The two case studies are also instructive in highlighting tactics and strategies to be employed by counterterrorism agencies and bodies in order to better coordinate or even prevent future attacks of this sort. In the last section of the chapter the profiles of the two lone actor extremists are compared.

Lastly, the overall conclusions of the analysis will be drawn.

# Chapter One

## 1.1: The relevance of lone wolf terrorists

Most of the Islamic attacks in Western Europe between 2015 and 2020 have been realized by the so called “lone wolf terrorists”. The existence and the role of these individuals in the sphere of terrorism particularly interested me: this is the reason why I decided to deepen my knowledge of this phenomenon. If, in fact, we analyse all the ISIS massacres, as Alessandro Orsini has done in the book “L’Isis non è morto, ha solo cambiato pelle”<sup>1</sup> and article “Gli attentati dell’Isis in Europa occidentale. Un’interpretazione sociologica”<sup>2</sup>, between the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2015, day of the slaughter of Charlie Hebdo, and the massacre in Vienna, the last in order of time, the predominance of these figures particularly stands out. Through a comparative analysis, Orsini has concluded that, with respect to what was believed in the past, ISIS attacks do not all possess the same nature. Consequently, he proceeded in dividing them in three categories.

The first category includes attacks organized directly by the heads of ISIS. Attacks falling into this category are those which cause the greatest number of deaths, according to the formula: “Strike those who strike us”. Following this inspiring logic, heads of ISIS concentrate their resources solely towards countries engaged in the fight against them. An example of ISIS leaders led attack is represented by the one occurred on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2015, when a command of nine jihadists divided in three groups of three individuals hit Paris in six different spots and killed 130 people by using grenades, machine-guns and explosive belts. The command was following ISIS leaders’ orders.

The second category comprises attacks carried out by lone wolf terrorists, which act in an autonomous way. Lone wolves’ actions are not predictable; in fact, they can hit any place in any city. Nevertheless, their attacks tend to provoke less victims with respect to those planned by ISIS heads. Having scarce economic resources and not being directed by the leaders of ISIS, they hit wherever they can, without spending money on trips and weapons. The aims of those pertaining to this category is an existential one, in the sense that they strive to feel part of an “imagined community”<sup>3</sup>, which would give significance to their sad and empty lives. This anthropological type has been denominated by Orsini as “terrorist by vocation”<sup>4</sup> or “vocational terrorist”. In order to better understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *L’Isis non è morto, ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018;

<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *Gli attentati dell’Isis in Europa occidentale. Un’interpretazione sociologica*, in “Democrazia e Sicurezza”, n. 3, 2019, pp. 101-133;

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1986; See also: Alessandro Orsini, *L’Isis non è morto, ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018, p. 78;

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *La radicalisation des terroristes de vocation*, in “Commentaire”, n. 4, 2016-2017, pp. 783-790;

concept, Max Weber's distinction between "living off politics" and "living for politics" is useful<sup>5</sup>. Whilst those who "live off politics" derive the means of subsistence from politics, those who "live for politics" devote their life to the attainment of a cause as to fulfil an inner need. Terrorists by vocation are, thus, individuals who sacrifice their lives as to accomplish a spiritual need. Lone wolves are in turn classified in "trained lone wolves" and "untrained lone wolves". The first manage to receive training in ISIS camps; the second, instead, act only because of an emotional appeal, without any contact with ISIS leaders.

Lone wolves' attacks can be exemplified by the massacre in Nice on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2016, carried out by Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, a man arrived in France from Tunisia eleven years before. On the day when the French celebrate the taking of the Bastille, the man threw himself with a truck against the crowd, causing the death of 86 pedestrians. Bouhlel had a tumultuous personal life, filled with misfortunes. First among them the divorce from his wife, apparently due to domestic violence, from which he had three children. Following that, he lost his job as he fell asleep whilst driving a truck. The testimonies of the father and brother of the terrorist demonstrate that the man was psychologically unstable: he abused of alcohol, drugs and suffered from depression. Moreover, through the inspection of the phone of the victim, the police found out that he had a very active sex life with both men and women. In essence, the instance of Bouhlel shows how a troubled and obscured interior life may lead to hyperviolence difficult to anticipate or prevent.

The third category, finally, includes attacks conducted by autonomous cells. As Orsini claims, they are called in this way because they are groups of jihadists that do not take orders from the heads of ISIS. So far there have been solely two attacks realized by autonomous cells. The case of the terrorists which realized a series of attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 is one of them.

A fundamental variable to take into account in the preparation of a terrorist attack is the organization of the terrorist group. This is why Orsini reiterates that, due to their higher level of organization, attacks perpetrated by the heads of ISIS are those which cause the most damage in comparison to the other two typologies. In order to provide evidence to his thesis, he proposes a comparison between the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 massacre in Paris and the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks in 2017. The differences between the offensive capacities of an ISIS-led cell and an autonomous cell are evident. Both the attacks were carried out by a command of nine jihadists. Nevertheless, whilst in the former attack, they were able to hit the city in six different spots and killing 130 people by making use of grenades, machine-guns and explosive belts, in Barcelona the dead were

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<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1946; See also: Alessandro Orsini, *What Everybody Should Know about Radicalization and the DRIA Model*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", 2020, p.21;

only 14 and the vehicle used was solely a van. Thus, in the latter case, jihadists were not only poorly skilled in the use of weapons but were also incautious and unprepared. Secondly, none of the terrorists involved in Spain had been trained. It follows that the explosive belts which they were wearing were all fake. Moreover, they committed the error of aiming to protect themselves from the attacks whilst being locked up in a van. Some of the shortcomings of autonomous cells also apply to lone wolf terrorists. In fact, being poor and untrained, reduces to a large extent their offensive capabilities.

**Table 1<sup>6</sup>** summarizes some of the attacks brought about by individuals pertaining to the three categories, from 2015 to 2017.

Category of the attack	Author/s of the attack	Site of the attack	Date of the attack	Victims of the attack
<i>Heads of ISIS</i>	Omar Mostefai, Brahim Abdeslam, Samy Amimour, Foued Mohamed-Aggad, Ahmad al-Mohammad, Bilal Hadfi, M. al-Mahmood, Salah Abdeslam, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Chakib Akrouh, Mohamed Abrini	Paris	13 November 2015	130
	Ibrahim El Bakraoui, Khalid El Bakraoui, Najim Laachraoui, Mohamed Abrini, Osama Krayem	Subway station and airport, Brussels	22 March 2016	32
<i>Untrained lone wolf terrorists</i>	Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel	Nice	14 July 2016	86
	Abderrahman Bouanane	City of Turku, Finland	18 August 2017	2 women
	Mohiussunnath Chowdhury	Great Britain	27 August 2017	None

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Orsini, *L'Isis non è morto, ha solo cambiato pelle*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2018, pp. 76-85;

	Not identified	Parsons Green station, London	15 September 2017	None
	Ahmedi Hanachi	Station of Saint-Charles, Marseille	1 October 2017	2
	Khalid Masood	Westminster, London	22 March 2017	5
	Bobicel Abdurakhmanov	Surgut, Siberia	19 August 2017	8 injured
<i>Trained lone wolf terrorists</i>	Salman Abedi	Manchester	22 May 2017	22
<i>Autonomous cells</i>	Khuram Butt Rachid Redouane Youssef Zaghba	London Bridge	3 June 2017	8
	4 suspected terrorists	Barcelona and Cambrils	17-18 August 2017	14

Through the above data, Orsini demonstrates that, following the massacre in Brussels in 2016, the protagonists of Islamic attacks in Western Europe have been mainly untrained lone wolf terrorists. For this reason, attention must be devolved to the study of this phenomenon. This is the empirical basis of my thesis.

## 1.2: Competing definitions of the lone wolf phenomenon

Considering the growing threat posed by lone wolf terrorists, a wide literature exists on the theme. One of the most important contributions was published recently by Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij<sup>7</sup>. By making reference to an extensive database of all known cases of lone wolf terrorism in the U.S. between 1940 and mid-2016, the authors combine criminological theory with empirical and ethnographic research in order to map the pathways of lone-wolf radicalization and illustrate the social and psychological processes involved therein.

Although imperative, there exists no professional consensus on the definition of lone wolf terrorism. Hamm and Spaaij, in the aforementioned book, define the phenomenon as:

<sup>7</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017;

“Political violence perpetrated by individuals who act alone; who do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network; who act without the direct influence of a leader or hierarchy; and whose tactics and methods are directed by the individual without any direct outside command or direction”<sup>8</sup>.

They contrast these types of terrorist attacks to those carried out by terrorist organizations or state bodies. The formulation stresses that, in the attempt to commit political violence, lone wolves do not conspire with anyone. Even though their radicalization may be incentivized by violent media images, books and propaganda, they are by nature solitary and prefer to act alone. Lone wolves may sympathize with ideological movements or groups, but they are not members of such movements and groups. In fact, Hamm and Spaaij privilege the “lone” component of the definition, by excluding the direct influence or support of others.

Some scholars place the emphasis on the classification of terrorists, rather than on a strict definition of lone wolf terrorism instead. Christopher Hewitt conceives of a terrorist group as comprising at least four individuals<sup>9</sup>. It follows that couples and trios are considered as lone wolf operations, leading to a significant inflation in the estimates of the incidence. Similarly, Paul Gill identifies three types of lone wolves: individual terrorists that plan alone and select their own targets; individual terrorists who receive training and are assigned specific targets by existing organizations or groups; couples who may radicalize together but are not subject to external direction<sup>10</sup>.

Other experts employ a broader definition of the phenomenon, in terms of both the motives as well as the number of perpetrators involved. Jeffrey Simon includes the so called “criminal lone wolf, namely “those who perpetrate their violence for purely personal or financial gain”<sup>11</sup>.

Finally, several authors reject the label “lone wolf terrorism” altogether. Jonathan White, for example, argues that the term has little practical value. In his words: “The term glorifies their actions and should not be used”<sup>12</sup>. Brian Jenkins, a veteran terrorism researcher, adds to the critique by arguing that: “Lone wolf terrorism is a romanticizing term that suggests a cunning and deadly perpetrator when that is not always the case”<sup>13</sup>. Researchers prefer to use the labels “lone actor terrorism”, “solo actor terrorism”, “single actor terrorism”, “lone rat terrorism” and similar pseudo-scientific buzzwords instead.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. VIII;

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to Al-Qaeda*, Routledge, New York, 2003;

<sup>10</sup> Paul Gill, *Lone Actor Terrorism: A Behavioral Analysis*, Routledge, New York, 2015;

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey D. Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*, Prometheus Books, New York, 2013, p.67;

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan R. White, *Terrorism: An Introduction*, Wadsworth, Belmont, 2003, p. 43;

<sup>13</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States since 9/11*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2011, p. 21;



### 1.3: Empirical studies on lone actors

Hamm and Spaaij identify three studies dominating the body of empirically based international research on lone wolf terrorism.

The preliminary analysis is represented by Hewitt's survey of three thousand terrorists, through information detucted from FBI annual terrorism reports, journalistic accounts and previous research<sup>14</sup>. In the period between 1955 and 1999, Hewitt found 30 cases of lone wolf terrorism in the United States and individuals were labelled as right wing racists, Islamic extremists, black militants or anti-abortionists. The scholar concluded that: "American terrorism differs from terrorism in other countries in that a significant proportion of terrorist attacks have been carried out by unaffiliated individuals rather than members of organized groups"<sup>15</sup>. He motivated the high prevalence of lone wolf terrorism in the country in terms of the leaderless resistance approach. The latter implies that, regardless of how well organized or secret, a terrorist group cannot elude law enforcement authorities; consequently, it is easier for an individual actor than a group to execute an attack.

A second important study was conducted by Spaaij himself<sup>16</sup>. Through the analysis of the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base and the Global Terrorism Database, he also ascertained that instances of American lone wolf terrorism augmented over the past two decades, but they have increased markedly in other Western countries as well.

Although there is no standard profile of the lone wolves, Spaaij's research is instructive in elucidating certain commonalities in their radicalization. First of all, the author acknowledges that lone actors are motivated by both personal and political complaints. In their ideologies, personal vendettas converge with broader political or religious grievances. Reasonably, it might be this precise factor which more than any other distinguishes lone wolves from members of larger terrorist groups, in which social-psychological processes of the entire group are more relevant than individual grievances. Second, contrarily to previous findings, Spaaij found that lone wolves are likely to be psychologically disturbed. They tend to have anxiety attacks, to be depressed or, in worst cases, even suffer from schizophrenia. Third, as stressed earlier, they are inclined to be loners with few friends. Lone wolves are unable to establish social relationships. Fourth, despite lone actors by definition do not collaborate with terrorist organization or groups, they might possess an affinity with an extremist group or may have gained membership in the latter in the past. Lone wolves' actions do not take place in a social vacuum, they may communicate with others through spoken and written statements.

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to Al-Qaeda*, Routledge, New York, 2003;

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.78;

<sup>16</sup> Ramon Spaaij, *The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assesment*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", n.33, 2019, pp. 854-870; Ramon Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention*, Springer, New York, 2012;

The third empirical study on lone wolf terrorism by Raffaello Pantucci is worth mentioning at this point<sup>17</sup>. In fact, he defines lone wolves as: “individuals who, while appearing to carry out their actions alone and without any physical outside investigation, in fact demonstrate some level of contact with operational extremists.”<sup>18</sup>. Pantucci specifically refers to radicalization occurring through the Internet. Three cases match this profile, among them Nidal Hasan, the U.S. Army psychiatrist responsible for the Fort Hood massacre.

#### **1.4: Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaij’s database on lone wolves’ background factors and motivations**

In order to be included in “The American Lone Wolf Terrorism Database” created by Hamm and Spaaij, cases in question must fit the definition of terrorism proposed by the two authors. In the period between 1940 and mid-2016, 123 cases conform to the definition. Data from each instance was collected through the analysis of previous research, biographies and memoirs of lone wolf terrorists, government reports, courts documents with criminal complaints and psychiatric evaluations.

After having assigned a case number for the lone wolf, the individual’s name and the year in which he/she was active, the database addresses the following twenty variables:

- Attacks/Plots
- Fatalities/Injuries
- Weapons Used
- Age At Time of Attack/Plot
- Race/Ethnicity
- Prior Criminal History
- Personal/Political Grievance
- Military History
- Employment Status at Time of Attack/Plot
- Mental Health Problems
- Affinity with Extremist Groups
- Marital status
- Broadcasting intent to commit terrorism

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<sup>17</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, *A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists*, London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, 2011;

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.19;

- Enabler of terrorism
- Locus of radicalization
- Triggering event
- Capture/Arrest
- Popular Culture Influence
- Influence on Popular Culture
- Source

The database enables to make a comparison between the instances of lone wolf terrorism occurred in the United States before 9/11 and those after 9/11 with the objective to examine the changing trends of the phenomenon. In order to do this, 15 sting operations were excluded from the totality of 123 cases, analysing solely 108.

The 39 lone actors operating between 1940 and 2000 committed 173 attacks, causing the death of 100 individuals and injuring another 305. The weapons employed have been homemade bombs and an array of firearms. Their 69 counterparts of the post 9/11 era have realized less attacks, precisely 147, but the killed and wounded were superior, 156 and 184 respectively. In addition to bombs and firearms, new generation terrorists employed small aircraft, biological weapons, knives and construction equipment as well. It follows that there has been an expansion of available weapons in the years 2000. In order to destroy a high-voltage switching station in rural Arkansas in 2013, Jason Woodring made use of gasoline, bolt cutters and hacksaw. This is an example of how lone wolves have employed more creative weaponry.

For what concerns the selection of targets to be attacked, political leaders are predominant in both eras. Like Sirhan Sirhan and James Earl Ray, lone wolves of post 9/11 have attempted to kill, amongst others, President Obama and his family. Nevertheless, the new generation of lone wolves have also attacked military bases and installations. These decentralized extremists put into question the validity of the state. In order to do so, they target the pillars of state authorities in Western societies, identified in police officers and soldiers. Prior to 9/11, not a single member of the United States military had targeted.

Hamm and Spaaij have also found evidence of the “copycat phenomenon” in a third of the cases under examination. As stated by criminologists, the latter consists in the “tendency to be inspired by sensational publicity surrounding violent murders”<sup>19</sup>. It is particularly frequent among young males

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<sup>19</sup> Loren Coleman, *The Copycat Effect: How the Media and Popular Culture Trigger the Mayhem in Tomorrow's Headlines*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2004; See also: Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 46;

with prior criminal records or histories of violence and mental health problems. The media plays a key role, in that through its constant coverage of these events, it encourages people which already display violent tendencies, to imitate them and enjoy their “fifteen minutes of fame”, as Andy Warhol claimed. Whilst traditional criminal copycats imitate previous criminals in order to merely pursue reputation in the eyes of others, lone wolves have a broader motive: they aim at making a political point. In the words of anthropologist Elliot Leyton, multiple murderers see themselves as “soldiers on a mission”, as “unjustly maltreated heroes wreaking vengeance on their oppressors”, their protest is “not on behalf of others”; instead, they murder in order to “relieve a burning grudge endangered by their failed ambition”<sup>20</sup>. In addition to being motivated by personal grievances, lone wolf terrorists become role models for others who empathize with their causes.

### **1.5: Analogy between lone wolves and terrorist organizations**

The authors have furthermore analysed the background factors of American lone wolf terrorists, by making a comparison with organized terrorists as well.

The first variable to be examined was the age of the militants. At the time of their attack/plot, lone actors are much older than organized terrorists. The average age at which they join the group was found to be 38 in the pre 9/11 era and 31 in the post 9/11 one. The age difference between the two may be accounted for by differences in their radicalization process. For organized terrorists the latter may take place due to group pressure within network of common believers and thus require the adoption of militant views in the shortest possible time. In the case of lone wolves, instead, radicalization is not fostered by social dynamics, but rather by more individualized ones. It follows that these individuals may take longer to embrace terrorism views. Nevertheless, recent instances of lone actors’ attacks demonstrate that the average age is falling. Charles Bishop, al-Qaeda supporter and author of the 2002 suicide airplane attack in Florida, was only fifteen-year- old at the time. Education was examined next. Militants who join international jihadist organizations proved to be more educated than their lone wolves’ counterparts. In fact, only one third of the latter were in possession of a university degree.

The standard profile of the lone wolf terrorist is that of a white, urban and unemployed single man with a criminal background. The majority of Salafi jihadists in Sageman’s research turned out to be married with children and employed as civil service employees or as professionals in scientific occupations instead<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Elliott Layton, *Hunting Humans: The Rise of the Modern Multiple Murderer*, Caroll & Graf, New York, 2001; See also: Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 47;

<sup>21</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004;

Sageman and other Salafi jihad scholars, such as Bakker, have also come to the conclusion that women do not play a dominant role in the group<sup>22</sup>. Yet, this has not historically been the case for lone actors. Shelley Shannon and Lynette Fromme are two of the women protagonists of terrorist attacks in the period before 9/11. According to Jeffrey Simon, there are two factors explaining the little impact of women in lone wolf terrorism since 9/11. In the first place, women are less risk-prone than men and, secondly, they tend to consider interactions with other humans as a priority<sup>23</sup>.

The last component which experts consider in giving an explanation for the differences between lone wolves and members of larger organizations is the mental health one. As mentioned earlier, Haam and Spaaij verified that the majority of lone actors in the database suffered from a psychological illness: out of 39, nine documented either schizophrenia or bipolarity, seven were diagnosed as manic depressive and four were delusional. Conversely, members of jihadist groups in Sageman and Bakker's study do not show any apparent mental disease. Nevertheless, it ought to be argued that the presence of a mental illness does not automatically bring about terrorism. The individual into question must also come into contact with a warrior subculture, that marks the passage from cognitive to violent radicalization. Before committing an act of terrorism, the victim must be stripped of his humanity: the physical elimination of the enemy is preceded by his dehumanization. Only then can the extremists "begin to think of themselves as soldiers"<sup>24</sup>.

The afore-described findings suggest that lone wolf terrorism originates from relative deprivation. The key to understand this concept is comparison: the feeling of being deprived of goods and social status to which they are entitled results from a comparison with what other individuals possess. For this reason, lone actors develop grievances against the government or a part of the population which they hold responsible for the precarious situation in which they find themselves. Violence is employed by them as a mean to fill the gap between their limited material resources and their aspiration of social respectability.

As denominated by sociologist Michael Kimmel, single, white and unemployed lone wolves undergo an "aggrieved entitlement", namely the perception that "their" country and sense of self are being stripped away by women, immigrants, people of GLBT individuals and others<sup>25</sup>. The Jihadi ideology presents the disconnected and oppressed individual a new existential point of reference in order to rebuild their social identity. In the case of large group organizations, isolated individuals are

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*; Edwin Bakker, *Jihadi Terrorists in Europe, their Characteristics and the Circumstances in which They Joined the Jihad: an Exploratory Study*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2006;

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*, Prometheus Books, New York, 2013;

<sup>24</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p.55;

<sup>25</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity and the End of an Era*, Nation Books, New York, 2015; See also: Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p.57;

recruited and fostered by the leaders of the group to displace violence and aggression against out-groups, which are labelled as evil.

Nonetheless, lone wolves operate in the absence of charismatic leaders which empower indoctrination. The radicalization process which they undertake is clearly different from that of members of larger terrorist organizations. It is to these dynamics that I now turn to.

### **1.6: Locus (places) of radicalization of lone actors**

It is commonly believed that lone actors “self-radicalize”, that conclusion is however not corroborated by Hamm and Spaaij’s database. In fact, the two authors identify several social networks which lead the individual in the pathway towards terrorism.

The most common radicalization locus in the pre 9/11 era was an extremist group to which lone wolves were previously members but had then abandoned. The years 2000 have experienced a decline in this figure, only 10% of lone wolves embarked on radicalization due to their previous affinity with an extremist group. The decrease in this trend is due to the development of technology. Thanks to social networks and other websites, terrorists such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Alex Jones have created the tribe. The latter is an international community aimed at providing comfort and support to people with overriding preoccupations. Thus, the affinity with online sympathizers has largely replaced that of extremist groups. In addition to assisting lone wolves, online sympathizers give them the choice to operate in the community which they prefer. In fact, individuals may experience radicalization through the communication with virtual friends and the consultation of online manuals on the technical skills required to carry out terrorist attacks, from any place in which they are located. Lone wolves and extremists make their acquaintance solely through their virtual identities, by becoming “Cyber Jihadists” or “Net Nazis”. The increasing collaboration with online sympathizers causes the progressive detachment from the surrounding environment, consequently accelerating their engagement with radicalism, by making identity change easier. As Sageman puts it: “The Internet has dramatically transformed the structure and dynamic of the evolving threat of... terrorism by changing the nature of terrorists’ interaction”<sup>26</sup>.

The military constitutes a more stable place of radicalization over time. Floyd Simpson, the murderer of civil rights crusader William Moore in rural Alabama in the ‘60s, had taken part in World War Two. Eric Rudolph had also developed personal anger and political grievances during his experience in the military. He hoped to be assigned to the Ranger Indoctrination Program in order to

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<sup>26</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008, p. 109;

later be transferred to the Special Forces. Instead, he managed to be enrolled only in a mere infantry unit in Kentucky.

Around 10% of lone wolves became radicalized whilst in jail or prison. James Earl Ray, for example, developed a close relationship with a prison chapter of the Ku Klux Klan during his permanence at the Missouri State Penitentiary.

Lone wolves may also be radicalized within their families. According to terrorism scholar Jerrold Post, ideology is frequently conveyed from generation to generation and, in the same way, violent radicalization<sup>27</sup>. This trend is, however, falling in the United States. Post specified that there are two categories of terrorists: those who carry on the work of their parents and those which completely reject their legacy. The latter, comprising certain European revolutionary groups and to a certain extent also American lone wolves, have been denoted as “children without fathers”<sup>28</sup>.

Following the development of mass media, the Internet emerged as a recent locus of radicalization in the post 9/11 era, particularly amongst lone wolves pertaining to the radical Right.

Another element which plays a crucial role in the radicalization process is that of the enablers. In committing the attack, lone actors are subject to either the direct enabling of individuals who assist in the preparation of the terrorist act or to the indirect enabling of people who provide inspiration. The latter may even take as role-models figures which are no longer alive. Adolf Hitler, for instance, is still considered an inspiring leader by lone wolves<sup>29</sup>. The deification of heroes and martyrs is a crucial factor in lone wolf terrorism. Terrorism expert Ariel Merari found the presence of this feature in his research of Palestinian would-be suicide bombers as well. Indeed, he claimed that “most of the bombers have heroes they admire and want to resemble. These can be fictional figures from movies or literature, admired family members, historical personalities, or current public figures”<sup>30</sup>. Numerically speaking, in the period between the 1940s and 2000, 57% of lone actors experienced enabling. Since 9/11, there has been a rise to 70% in this trend and it mainly consists in indirect enabling. This last may manifest as stochastic terrorism, which consists in inciting acts of violence that are predictable solely statistically, not individually, with the aid of mass media. The technique is employed by ISIS in recruiting supporters from all around the world. Thanks to convincing

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<sup>27</sup> Jerrold M. Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to Al-Qaeda*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007;

<sup>28</sup> Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, Random House, New York, 2006; See also: Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 63;

<sup>29</sup> Ramon Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention*, Springer, New York, 2012;

<sup>30</sup> Ariel Merari, *Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, p.96;

communication skills, the stochastic terrorists are able to express violence, but they are unaware of the individuals which will capture their message and actually engage in violent behaviour.

Lone wolves do not commit to physical relationships with the surrounding environment. Nevertheless, they may be in contact with others through videotaped proclamations, manifestos and menacing statements in which they openly declare their grievances and express their urging need for physical, verbal or written confrontation with adversaries. Experts refer to this broadcasting intent with the terms “seepage” and “signalling” as well. It precedes an attack and may take place any time before it, weeks, days, hours or even a few minutes earlier. Consequently, the ability to grasp violent intentions beforehand is a crucial step in the prevention of lone wolf terrorism. Most of the well-known actors have broadcasted their intentions before realizing the upcoming massacre but, unfortunately, in some instances their messages have not been captured.

The ultimate step in the radicalization process of lone wolf terrorists is constituted by one, or more, triggering events. They are defined as: “single events, or a series of events happening in close succession, that trigger within the group the conviction that acts of violence and terrorism by a group are necessary. The triggering event is the ‘last straw’ beyond which the only recourse is violence”<sup>31</sup>. The nature of the latter may be personal, political or even a combination of the two types of grievances. These events may occur promptly, with the resulting attacks taking place immediately, without a meticulous planning beforehand. Alternatively, there might be an accumulation of escalating triggering events, up until the point where the person involved can no longer handle the psychological pressure and initiates the attack.

### **1.7: Radicalization Model of Lone Wolf Terrorism**

After having investigated into the commonalities among American lone wolf terrorists, Hamm and Spaaij have created a unique model in the field of terrorism, the “Radicalization Model of Lone Wolf Terrorism”. It is the only known radicalization model to focus solely on the radicalization of lone wolves and it comprises all their ideologies and motives. Following scholar Peter Neumann’s differentiation between cognitive radicalization, consisting in the acquisition of a radical mental universe and violent radicalization, focusing on the actual employment of violence, this model is representative of the latter<sup>32</sup>. In fact, it was empirically demonstrated that all cases considered in the database have ended up in attempted terrorism or terrorism. Violence is intended by lone actors as the most suitable means in order to advance their personal and political causes as well as to fight against an unjust system. The model is made up of five components, culminating into the commission

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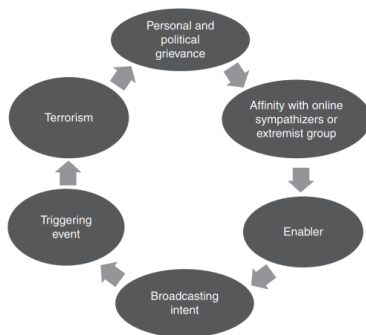
<sup>31</sup> Jerrold M. Post, Keven Ruby and Eric Shaw, *The Radical Group in Context: An Integrated Framework for the Analysis of Group Risk for Terrorism*, in “Studies in Conflict and Terrorism”, n. 25, 2002, p. 97;

<sup>32</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *The Trouble with Radicalization*, in “International Affairs”, n. 89, 2013, p. 873-93;



of the terrorist act, thus suggesting that radicalization is not determined by the presence of a single element, but rather by the intertwining of a series of “push and pull” elements. Nevertheless, differently from other radicalization models, this one is not always linear. For becoming a lone wolf terrorist an individual does not have to pass through each and every stage but may skip stages and finalize its path toward terrorism in a rather short amount of time.

**Figure 1**<sup>33</sup> provides a graphical representation of the “Radicalization Model of Lone Wolf Terrorism”.



The model is important in assessing the implications for capturing lone wolf terrorists. A characteristic of lone actors pertaining to the pre 9/11 era was that of operating under the closed eye of law enforcement, partly thanks to their impressive criminal talents. James Kopp, Eric Rudolph and Theodore Kaczynski as well as other deadly murderers managed to prevent any attempt to execute them. This has changed in the post 9/11 period. Indeed, only one of the contemporary lone wolves, Bruce Ivins, evaded capture for more than one year. There is a main difference between the two time periods. The most notorious lone wolf terrorists operating before 9/11 survived in their own wits as fugitives; their counterparts, instead, are encouraged by a broader ideological motive. They are inscribed in Eric Hoffer’s tradition of the true believer, “the man of fanatical faith who is ready to sacrifice his life for a holy cause”<sup>34</sup>. They fight until the end, without surrendering, similarly to soldiers in a pitched battle. They aimed at dying in glory in defence for their causes, taking inspiration from al-Qaeda and ISIS’ suicide bombers.

An overall conclusion can be deducted as to account for the high incidence of lone wolf terrorism in the United States and its highest level of lethality if compared to other countries. As al-Qaeda spokesman Adam Gadahn once proclaimed in a Youtube video regarding the threat posed by lone actors in the U.S: “America is absolutely awash with easily obtainable firearms. You can go

<sup>33</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 159;

<sup>34</sup> Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York, 2002, p. 12-13;

down to a gun show at the local convention centre and come away with a fully automatic assault rifle, without a background check, and most likely without having to show identification. So, what are you waiting for?”<sup>35</sup>. In America, even apparently marginalised and alienated individuals may come into possession of high-empowered firearms and ammunition with extreme ease.

Hamm and Spaaij have focused on instances of lone wolf terrorism in the United States. Nevertheless, most of the motivations and background factors which they have explored apply to lone wolves operating elsewhere as well.

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<sup>35</sup> CNN, “Al Qaeda Video Resurfaces Claiming How Easy It Is to Buy Guns in U.S”, April 12, 2013, available on: <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/11/politics/al-qaeda-video/index.html> (viewed on February 16, 2021).

## Chapter Two

### Introduction to the chapter

This chapter presents the psychological processes underlying lone wolf terrorism. Protagonists in this area are undoubtedly the experts Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko. The first section explores the mechanisms of radicalization undergone by single-actor terrorists, analysed with the aid of practical examples. Following this, the focus shifts on the crucial differentiation to be made between radical attitudes and the actual engagement into violent behaviour, which are not necessarily consequential. A third matter which the authors give an explanation to is the apparent irrational decision of lone extremist actors to sacrifice themselves for grievances suffered by individuals which they do not know personally. The final portion of the chapter is provocative in nature, in that it challenges the common conception of the lone wolf phenomenon, by proposing the need to redefine its motives.

### 2.1: Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko on the individual mechanisms of radicalization

Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko are social psychologists who have been devoted to the study of the psychological processes characterising the conversion to radicalism and terrorism. Together they have written a series of articles and books on the abovementioned topics<sup>36</sup>. The scholars define radicalization as “a process by which individuals, groups or even large publics become increasingly accepting of violence for a cause. Terrorism is an end point; radicalization is the road that leads to that end point”<sup>37</sup>. According to them, radicalization is a complex phenomenon which should be conceptualized in a complex way. Consequently, in one of their most well-known books, they proceed in studying it at three different levels: individual radicalization, group radicalization and mass radicalization<sup>38</sup>. Each of them is composed by several mechanisms, which are in turn described, in accordance to the meaning utilized in psychology as “the means or manner in which something is accomplished. Thus, the mechanism of vision includes the physical stimulus and the physiological

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<sup>36</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism*, in “Terrorism and Political Violence”, n. 20, 2008, pp. 415-433; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual from Radical Opinion to Radical Action*, in “Terrorism and Political Violence”, n. 26, 2014, pp. 69-85; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Radicalization to Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Conflict Radicalizes Them And Us*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011;

<sup>37</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Radicalization to Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020, p. 4;

<sup>38</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Conflict Radicalizes Them And Us*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011;

and neural processes involved”<sup>39</sup>. In order for a terrorist organization to be successful, the three types of radicalization need to overlap and combine.

Individual radicalization is important to study the particular political phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism. McCauley and Moskalenko identify six mechanisms for individual radicalization. The first one, personal grievance, takes place when an individual perceives they have been the victim of an injustice and seek revenge for that. Lone wolf terrorists may feel hatred toward the responsible person only, or that may even spread to the entire social category to which that person belongs. This path is prevalent in explanations of suicide terrorists. Chechen Black Widows, for example, are portrayed as pursuing revenge against Russians due to either their own experience of rape or the death of their menfolk<sup>40</sup>.

Group grievance occurs instead when an individual empathizes with grievances suffered by other people, which are part of a group they do not belong to. The individual in this case wants revenge on their behalf. This mechanism helps in understanding the paradox of people engaging in terrorism even though they are wealthy and possess a good level of education. The experience of John Allen Muhammad, who killed ten people in the Washington area in 47 days of sniper attacks in September and October 2002, is representative of this mechanism of radicalization. The man’s intention, after having converted to Islam and separatism, was that of stealing ten million dollars in order to found a pure black community in Canada. He reacted to the victimization of black people in the U.S.<sup>41</sup>

Slippery slope consists in a gradual and, to some extent, unintentional radicalization. The person concerned is radicalized from a cognitive point of view, there is no intention to deliver violence nor to take part in violent activities. The individual, nonetheless, happens to be involved in a series of situations which drive them toward terrorism. This mechanism is the proof that it is not always ideology that leads toward terrorism. Donatella Della Porta provides a fitting example of progressive radicalization by quoting the following of an Italian militant:

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<sup>39</sup> James Patrick Chaplin, *Dictionary of Psychology*, Dell, New York, 1975, p.285;

<sup>40</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Radicalization to Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020, p. 37;

<sup>41</sup> Carol Morello, *Virginia Court Upholds Muhammad Sentences: Sniper Could be Sent to Another State*, “Washington Post”, April 23, 2005, available on: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/technology/2005/04/22/the-virginia-supreme-court-thi/f11c2abb-d336-48ed-9f71-bf855bee72c9/> (viewed on March 8, 2021);

“A choice [made] in cold blood, such as ‘now I will become a terrorist,’[did] not exist. It was a step-by-step evolution which passed through a kind of human relation I had with Guido, and with the people I worked with”<sup>42</sup>.

The power of self-radicalization is also explored in experimental variations, particularly by Milgram and Zimbardo in their studies of obedience. The psychologist Philip Zimbardo is the author of the famous 1971 simulation of prison life aimed at studying the dynamics of prisoner-guard interactions, in which he employed Stanford students as subjects and assigned them roles as prisoners or guards at random<sup>43</sup>. Throughout the simulation, which became rapidly and progressively real, participants started displaying psychological damage due to their mock incarceration and some of them were questioning their own self-images by manifesting degrees of sadism. Zimbardo was obliged to end the experiment. Despite feelings and beliefs were not valued during the Prison Experiment, the trend is that of moving toward a more dehumanizing treatment of the prisoners. A pattern of gradually increasing radical behaviour can be observed. Every step in the slippery slope mechanism is only imperceptibly diverse from the previous one. The rationale is that each preceding step functions as a justification for the future one. Radicalization of new members into terrorist organizations also follows a slippery slope logic. The recruits enter the organization gradually, undertaking small tests in order for their loyalty and character to be examined before being trusted for more relevant missions.

Love for a partner, friend or family member may be another drive leading to terrorism. Devotion to comrades may push a group of friends to become members of a terrorist group together. As group cohesion increases thanks to the identification of common goals and common threats, it becomes progressively harder to abandon the terrorist group.

The fifth mechanism is characterized by love for risk seeking and the pursuit of social prestige. Some individuals, especially those from lower classes with poor prospects for education or a good job, engage in risk-taking attitudes with the objective of becoming famous terrorists.

Unfreezing is the final mechanism of individual radicalization. People face it when, due to a civil war or an emigration toward another country, they unexpectedly lose their jobs, families and previous social networks. Consequently, they find themselves in a completely new reality. By

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<sup>42</sup> Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1995; See also: Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism*, in “Terrorism and Political Violence”, n. 20, 2008, p. 420;

<sup>43</sup> This experiment took place in the Psychology Department of Stanford University in 1971, major information available on: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/quiet-rage-the-stanford-prison-study/oclc/24486943>;

offering companionship and protection as well as an ideology imbuing meaning and order to a disconnected life, terrorist organizations might be appealing to these individuals.

McCauley and Moskaleiko conclude that, with the possible exception of group grievance for lone wolf terrorists, the presence of solely one of the above mentioned mechanisms is not sufficient for radicalization to take place.

The two authors also downplay the role of ideology as a factor leading to radicalization. In their words, describing radical ideology as the source of radicalization is “too simple and too general”<sup>44</sup>. Ideology can be regarded as important insofar as it constitutes a source of justification for violence. Other scholars support this argument. Marc Sageman, adopting the social identity position, asserts that “the turn to political violence is more about identity than ideology”<sup>45</sup>. Similarly, Martha Crenshaw contends that “it is difficult to use ideology as a critical variable that explains the resort to or the continuation of terrorism” as “the group, as selector and interpreter of ideology, is central”<sup>46</sup>.

### **2.1.1: Two-pyramids model of radicalization**

Research in social psychology demonstrates that the correlation between attitude and behaviour is weak, as the latter is determined by many other elements other than attitude<sup>47</sup>. Among them, moral judgement, means and opportunity, perceived control and social norms. Research on terrorism, similarly, has concluded that only a small portion of individuals with radical ideas actually engage in violence<sup>48</sup>. For this reason, McCauley and Moskaleiko analyse the phenomenon of radicalization of opinion and that of radicalization of action separately and propose a pyramid model for each of the two<sup>49</sup>.

The global jihad’s narrative comprises four main parts:

- 1) Western crusaders, whose leader is the United States, are attacking Islam;
- 2) Jihadis, identified by the West as terrorists, are defending against such attacks;
- 3) The actions of defence undertaken by Islam are considered proportional, just and religiously sanctified;

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<sup>44</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskaleiko, *Friction: How Conflict Radicalizes Them and Us*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p. 5;

<sup>45</sup> Marc Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2017, p. 383;

<sup>46</sup> Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, Routledge, Oxon, 2011, p.73;

<sup>47</sup> John Sabini, *Social Psychology*, Norton, New York, 1995;

<sup>48</sup> Clark Mc Cauley and Sophia Moskaleiko, *Radicalization to Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020;

<sup>49</sup> Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskaleiko and Clark McCauley, *Containing the Narrative: Strategy and Tactics in Countering the Storyline of Global Jihad*, in “Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counterterrorism”, n. 5, 2010, pp. 42-57;

4) Consequently, all good Muslims should commit for the fulfilment of such actions<sup>50</sup>.

Such narrative is graphically illustrated as a pyramid, made up of four levels. The base is composed of Muslims which do not identify with the political cause advanced by the narrative of global jihad. Atop them are those which agree to the proposition that the West is fighting against Islam. The third layer includes Muslims which justify the actions of defence against the West. The highest position in the pyramid, finally, is occupied by those who feel a sense of moral obligation in protecting Islam.

The global jihad narrative model carries out the implication that most individuals are concentrated in the lower layers of the pyramid, which are less radicalized. Data on polls provides support to this thesis. More than half of the Muslim population in the U.K. and U.S. assume that the war on terrorism is one against Islam, thus they are sympathizers to the political cause. Instead, only around 5% of Muslims seem to justify suicide bombing if defending Islam<sup>51</sup>.

Turning to radicalization of action, the corresponding pyramid is also characterized by four levels. At the base here are politically inert Muslims which do nothing for the group. Higher are the activists, namely those which take part in non-violent and legal actions in defence of the cause. The higher level is represented by individuals, denominated as radicals, which participate in illegal actions, at times employing violence. Examples are sit-ins and property destruction. Terrorists, targeting civilians by making use of lethal violence, occupy the apex of the pyramid.

Having described the two pyramids of radicalization in detail, it is important to point out that neither of them is a conveyor belt which requires the progression through each succeeding phase, rather individuals may reach the highest level by skipping stages. In practical terms, most activists never became radicals. Conversely, in order to become a radical, there is no need to be an activist beforehand.

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<sup>50</sup> Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, "Narratives and Counter-Narratives for Global Jihad: Opinion Versus Action", in AA.VV. *Countering Extremist Narratives* edited by E.J.A. M. Kessels, The Hague: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2010, pp. 58-70;

<sup>51</sup> Clark McCauley and Sarah Scheckter, *What's Special About US Muslims? The War on Terrorism as Seen by Muslims in the United States, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", n. 11, 2008, pp. 1024-1031;

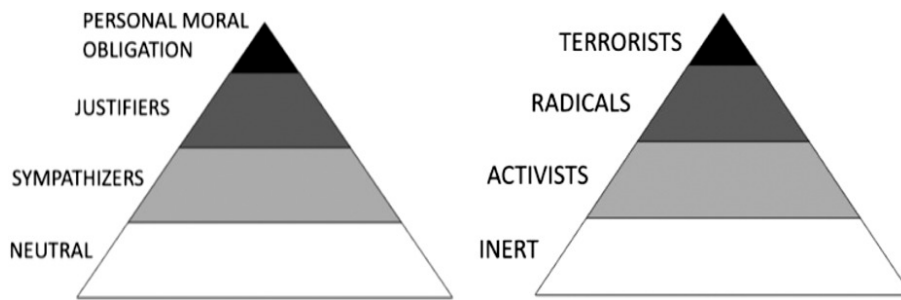


Figure 1. Action and Opinion Radicalization Pyramids<sup>52</sup>

Lone wolf terrorists might appear as a challenge to the methodological separation between these two models. Without joining a terrorist group and consequently acting without its support, they constitute the eventuality in a which radical opinion directly brings about a radical action. In order to explain this potential likelihood, McCauley and Moskalkenko identify two distinct profiles of lone wolf terrorist: the disconnected disordered and the caring-compelled. The former comprises school attackers and assassins, which in most cases are lone actors that possess a grievance, weak social ties and an experience with weapons outside the military. Thus, in engaging with lethal political violence, they would not have much to lose. Caring compelled lone actors, instead, empathize with their victims and it is precisely their emotions which guide them towards the employment of violence.

### 2.1.2: Lone wolves' self-sacrifice

For the purpose of further deepening the psychology of lone wolves, McCauley and Moskalkenko aim at understanding two other enigmas. The first one is why an individual would sacrifice himself, at times leaving his loved ones behind, in order to claim a wrong done to a particular stranger. The second one, instead, relates to the reason why a person would risk his own safety and well-being by empathizing with the grievance suffered by a group of unknown strangers. In economic terms, the concerns raised by these issues are framed as the “free-rider problem”<sup>53</sup>. The question which arises is: “Why would an individual sacrifice anything for a public good, which might be equality, justice or freedom, which will provide profits to third parties as well?”. A more rational approach would be that of making other individuals sacrifice and enjoy the fruits of their efforts instead of letting these individuals take advantage your own efforts.

Several political scientists have noticed the shortcomings of the rational choice theory in accounting for the self-sacrifice which motivates lone wolf terrorists and suicide bombers. Ashutosh Varshney suggests employing the differentiation proposed by Max Weber between “instrumental

<sup>52</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, *Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual from Radical Opinion to Radical Action*, in “Terrorism and Political Violence”, n. 26, 2014, pp. 71-73;

<sup>53</sup> Mancur Olson Jr., *The Logic of Collective Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965;



rationality” and “value rationality”<sup>54</sup>. Whilst in the case of the former individuals in question resort to a cost-benefit analysis before undertaking a particular action, value rational behaviour does not take into account the costs or the probability to attain the goal. This may signify that striving to achieve this second type of goal is self-rewarding, regardless of the resulting costs and outcomes. Nonetheless, eventually only few individuals dedicate their lives to value-rational objectives. A more convincing explanation accounting for the free-rider problem might be that self-sacrifice depends on the rewards and punishments offered by small groups, organization or institutions.

Despite being more persuasive, this account fails to explain the employment of political violence in the case of individuals which act without the support of larger groups. Consequently, two additional elucidations are provided for lone wolf terrorists’ self-sacrifice. The first one, from evolutionary psychology, is known as strong reciprocity<sup>55</sup>. It presupposes that cooperation among humans can lead to advantages. To give an example, a hunter which manages to obtain a large amount of meat on one day, will give a share of it to the other members of the group if he expects them to behave in the same way on a less fortunate day for him. Nevertheless, the benefits of cooperation may be reaped by free riders, which will enjoy the fruits of collaboration without minimally participating. It follows that, the growing presence of cheaters in the system will damage the pure altruists in the group. The solution to this problem is the acknowledgment that altruism can bring about profits solely when individuals, occasionally even those who have not directly experienced the violation, are willing to punish defectors. Economic games, such as the Prisoner’s Dilemma, are based on the rationale of cooperation. Their results demonstrate that oftentimes individuals are ready to pay personal costs in order to condemn bad behaviour. A conclusion that can be drawn from this first account is that a potential barrier preventing individuals to punish unjust and immoral actions is the extreme personal costs of radicalization to violent action.

A second explanation for lone wolves’ self-sacrifice is the capacity for group identification<sup>56</sup>. The latter may occur in two distinct ways. Positive identification takes place when one feels good when the other is economically prospering and safe, but will feel bad if the other is undergoing a hard time. Negative identification, instead, is the opposite mechanism: gratification when the other is in difficulty and discontentment when the other flourishes. Positive identification may involve even individuals or groups which are not part of one’s own circle, which are thus unknown. Even though one’s own material welfare is not increased by caring for these individuals, a large amount of material

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<sup>54</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, *Nationalism, ethnic conflict and rationality*, in “Perspectives on Politics”, n. 1, 2003, pp. 85-99;

<sup>55</sup> Ernst Fehr, Urs Fischbacher and Simon Gächter, *Strong reciprocity, human cooperation and the enforcement of social norms*, in “Human Nature”, n. 13, 2002, pp. 1-25;

<sup>56</sup> Sophia Moskalenko, Clark McCauley and Paul Rozin, *Group identification under conditions of threat: College students’ attachment to country, family, ethnicity, religion and university before and after September 11*, in “Political Psychology”, n. 27, 2001, pp. 77-97;

and emotional resources are invested. Once this mechanism is embarked, group interest overrules personal interest. The identification with a group which is regarded as victimized arouses a sentiment of anger and animosity towards those which are responsible for their victimization. Support to sufferers and damage to perpetrators are rewarding and indeed offer the incentives to carry out an attack. As I stressed earlier, lone actors operate without the backing of a terrorist organization or group. It follows that they are not encouraged to act because of externally imposed contingencies, rather they decide according to their own free will. This may entail that in the case of lone wolves the attainment of ideals of justice and security outweigh the action itself, which is attributed major importance by radical groups and organizations. As a bottom line, it ought to be argued that lone wolf terrorism involves the combination of a strong capacity of sympathy with the victim and a practical experience which turns the sympathy into the moral duty to act.

## **2.2: Objections to the presumed solitude of lone wolves**

The empirical data and the sociological theories exposed so far pointed out at the growing threat of violence perpetrated by lone actor extremists in the United States and in Europe. Yet, a recent strand of research on terrorism more generally, has started challenging commonly held beliefs with respect to the phenomenon of the lone wolves. Particularly outstanding in this regard is a study conducted in a time span of three years by Bart Schuurman, Lasse Lindekilde, Stefan Malthaner, Francis O'Connor, Paul Gill and Noémie Bouhana<sup>57</sup>. By examining the radicalization processes and the attack planning of lone actor extremists active in Europe and the United States between 1978 and 2015, they concluded that the typology of "lone wolf" should be fundamentally re-evaluated, as too frequently it rests on suppositions which turn out to be adverse for both terrorism scholars and those responsible for its detection. Two main pieces of evidence are brought by the authors in support of their thesis.

The first argument concerns the presence of social ties throughout the path from the embracement of radical beliefs to the planning and preparation of terrorist attacks. Despite many scholars place much emphasis on the lone component by emphasizing that the individuals in question operate in total isolation from the surrounding environment, the authors contend that in reality this is not the case. Indeed, they believe that, in order to maintain their radical ideology strong and contemporarily their ability to engage in violent activities, lone extremists necessitate the interaction with radical milieus, be it face-to face or through online platforms. The acknowledgement of the

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<sup>57</sup> Bart Schuurman, Lasse Lindekilde, Stefan Malthaner, Francis O'Connor, Paul Gill and Noémie Bouhana, *End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", n. 8, 2019, pp. 771-778;

existence of these social ties would presumably benefit counterterrorism experts and agencies in the detection and infiltration of these type of attacks.

Lone wolf terrorism is oftentimes exemplified by the figure of Anders Breivik, who killed seventy seven people in 2011 in the city of Oslo and the island of Utoya in Norway, and that of Ted Kaczynski, responsible for the death of three individuals and the injury of other twenty-three. Both were by nature solitary and consequently managed to realize the deadly massacres on their own. Nevertheless, an accurate analysis of other instances of lone wolves, would suggest that such high profile cases are an exception rather than an archetype. Most lone wolf extremists, precisely because of external social relations with other actors, are vulnerable to detection and oftentimes reveal their violent intentions in the period ahead of the attack.

The study approaches lone actor radicalization from a relational point of view. This enables to categorize involvement into radical milieus on the basis of various degrees of “loneness”. As regards the latter, the authors stress that it should not be viewed as an intrinsic quality of the individuals, rather it is generated by their limited capacity to commit to social relationships or to abrupt changes in their surrounding environments. In this context the writers cite the example of David Copeland, who is known for having conducted a solo bombing in London causing three deaths and 140 people injured. Before embarking on the deadly attack, the terrorist had attempted to establish a neo-Nazi terror cell, which would have cooperated in carrying out the massacre.

Notwithstanding the fact that lone wolves are frequently unable to engage in stable physical relationships with terrorist organizations or groups, the social context still exercises influence on them to a certain extent. The mere radicalization through online platforms enables lone actors to develop social ties with other extremists, even if weak and disconnected. Nonetheless, in many cases, they decide to abandon these milieus in the period preceding the attack preparation and execution. It follows that lone wolves should not be identified as solitary murderers which voluntary decide to isolate themselves. Rather, they are forced to do so because of external contingencies, such as the lack of social skills or the presence of some mental illness. The research demonstrates that 78 percent of lone actors in the sample have been motivated or were provided justification in carrying out deadly massacres by authority figures with which they had previously been involved<sup>58</sup>. Moreover, in some of the cases they also benefitted from the external assistance in the provision of the weapons and materials necessary. The resulting implication is that the label “lone wolf” overestimates the degree of solitude, as the individuals actually experience loneliness exclusively throughout the commission of the attack.

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<sup>58</sup> Bart Schuurman, Edwin Bakker, Paul Gill and Noemi Bouhana, *Lone Actor Terrorist Attack Planning and Preparation: A Data-Driven Analysis*, in “Journal of Forensic Sciences”, n. 63/4, 2017, pp. 1191-1200;

A second misconception debunked in the paper is the commonly-held belief that lone wolves are highly surreptitious and cautious in the planning of their assaults. The authors corroborate that a great deal of them neglect basic security measures in realizing their operations<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, many individuals in the sample disregarded their plot's secrecy. For example, some stored weapons or explosives in their own house rather than in other more secure locations. Others operated under their real names rather than creating false ones, thus being more recognizable. One of the motives for which a highly profile such as that of Ted Kaczynsky, nicknamed as the "Unabomber", managed to successfully carry out the attack is thanks to the anonymity which he decided to preserve.

The two arguments disprove ordinary thinking of the lone wolf phenomenon and call for a reconsideration of the concept. Having demonstrated that lone actor extremists are to a varying degree influenced by external personalities and the surrounding environment, it might not be needed to classify these individuals as a distinct typology of terrorism. Assailants, their process of radicalization and the organization of the attacks should be categorized on a continuum from truly-isolated to group-based. However, lone wolves' dynamics might not be too different from the ones activated in the other types of massacres, differently to what it is often assumed.

The observations also yield an implication with relation to counterterrorism actors and agencies. The presence of the kinships observed would enable them to embark on a new route in tracking and pursuing lone wolves through their broader networks. After having verified that only a handful of their attacks are successful and thus constitute outliers, several critics are coming to the conclusion that the label "lone wolf" might be discarded altogether. Pundits also draw attention to a shortcoming in the general field of terrorism, namely the frequent improper classification of attacks. An inclination has developed among experts to view advancements in terrorists' modus operandi as signalling the birth of a new type of terrorism which does not fit to pre-existing categories<sup>60</sup>. Nevertheless, a closer examination at the instances through the existing tools would enable to give answers to the problem, instead of reinventing the wheel.

### **2.2.1: Research on the relational dynamics of lone actor extremists**

The alleged loneliness of lone wolves is also challenged in a recent article by David C. Hofmann, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick in Canada<sup>61</sup>. Through the use of social network analysis applied to two practical case-studies of lone actors, the

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*;

<sup>60</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn, *How New is the New Terrorism*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", n. 27/5, 2004, pp. 439-454;

<sup>61</sup> David C. Hofmann, *How "Alone" are Lone-Actors? Exploring the Ideological, Signaling, and Support Networks of Lone-Actor Terrorists*, in "Studies in Conflict and Terrorism", n. 43/7, 2018, pp. 657-678.

author aims at reconstructing the dynamics which take place during the twenty-four months prior to the realization of the attacks. Social network analysis constitutes a technique which investigates the social relations among a set of actors. The social networks presented in this study are labelled as “dark networks”, in that the actors concerned tend to be protective to the outside world of their social relationships. In fact, they pose several difficulties to scholars which intend to study them. First of all, given that lone wolves do not engage in stable relationships and consequently their kinships vary over time, the dark networks are dynamic. Secondly, the data obtained is oftentimes incomplete because in the certain stages of the attack the individuals in question might operate in secrecy.

Despite these difficulties, in order to assess the lone wolves’ broader ties, Hofmann divides networks in four categories:

- 1) Full network, comprising family relatives, friends, co-workers and the broader circle of acquaintances of the lone actor;
- 2) Ideology network, made up of individuals with whom the lone actor engaged in an extremist or radical discourse connected to the cognitive beliefs which he holds. This may entail both violent as well as nonviolent discourses;
- 3) Signaling network, including individuals to which the lone actor revealed information regarding the organization or execution of their act of violence;
- 4) Support network, consisting of individuals which have assisted the lone actor with either material or immaterial support at some stage of the attack. They may decide to do so intentionally, by providing weapons or explosives for example, or unintentionally, giving money to the lone actor without knowing that he/she will use it for violent purposes.

Once a great deal of data was collected for the case studies under consideration, two coders created a binary adjacent matrix comprising information on the abovementioned networks as well as on basic attributes, such as gender and age. The instances which the author examines are that of Timothy McVeigh, who carried out the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, causing the death of 168 individuals and Michael Zehaf- Bibeau, responsible of the murder of Corporate Nathan Cirillo in Ottawa, Canada. The former was hostile towards the government and held a far-right wing ideology. The latter, instead, acted as a victim of a personal grievance because he was denied the possibility of obtaining a Canadian alongside with a Libyan passport, having his father a double nationality.

Network-level characteristics shed light on interesting structural characteristics of the two terrorists. The largest network is the full one in both cases, being constituted by sixty-two

individuals in McVeigh's sample and twenty-six in Zehaf Bibeau's one. These individuals are in turn related to other five actors approximately, as demonstrated by degree centrality scores. Concerning ideology, the findings are more cohesive. The lone actor extremists partook in radical conversations with a significant part of their wider social circle. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that these debates occurred in small groups of three or four individuals. Signaling networks are less frequent in both cases, suggesting that intentions to deliver violence were revealed to roughly one other actor. Finally, regarding external support provided to the lone wolf at any stage of the attack, results are similar in the two cases. They indicate that the lone actor extremists have benefited from the assistance of approximately a fifth to a quarter of their full networks and they preferred to be helped by single individuals rather than a collectivity.

The present study also enables to define which subgroup categories are more prevalent among McVeigh's and Zehaf-Bibeau's full networks. In both cases, acquaintances prevail, followed by friends and co-workers and finally family members. Although it is not possible to draw generalizable inferences through the sole examination of two case studies, this research exposes in detail the relational dynamics of lone wolf terrorism and it concludes that the epithet "lone wolf" is inappropriate as most lone extremists do not actually radicalize, organize and carry out their attacks in isolation from the surrounding environment.

## Chapter Three

### Introduction to the chapter

After having conducted an in-depth analysis of the characteristics and background factors of lone wolf terrorists as well as the psychological processes underlying their actions, in this chapter I will present two practical case studies of lone actor extremists. The first relates to the experience of Carlos Bledsoe, responsible for the Little Rock military shooting. The second, instead, takes into consideration the Christchurch terror attack carried out by Brenton Harrison Tarrant on the basis of a report by the well-known Israeli terrorism expert, Boaz Ganor. Each case study is instructive in yielding more general assertions and conclusions with regards to the phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism, which will be exposed after each instance. The final section of the chapter is built as a comparative analysis of the two lone wolves.

### 3.1: Carlos Leon Bledsoe and the Little Rock Military Shooting

This first case study is best exemplified by the lone wolf radicalization model proposed by Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, which I have described in the previous chapters. Consequently, I will proceed by exposing the terrorist's instance by linking it to some of the stages in the model.

Carlos Leon Bledsoe was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on July 9, 1985 from a family belonging to the African American community in the area. Together with his older sister Monica, he was brought up by his parents according to middle class values, such as frugality and of hard work. Indeed, Bledsoe started working at the family tour company when he was only eight years old. His father Melvin described him as a joyful teenager who enjoyed playing basketball, listening to hip-hop music and dancing. Yet, he soon engaged in gang life. Whilst in high school, in fact, he received several suspensions for fighting and threats to commit murder. As he moved to Nashville in order to attend University, the situation worsened. Particularly remarkable is a criminal incident which took place on February 21, 2004 in the evening. He was riding in the back seat of a car which a police officer pulled over for a security check. The man driving the vehicle fled, leaving Bledsoe in the car with weapons, including a semi-automatic assault rifle and a pound of marijuana. Following this incident he was arrested and was expected to serve a fourteen year sentence. Nevertheless, thanks to a group of lawyers hired by his parents, Bledsoe's charges were dropped. This incident terrified him and changed the course of his life.

At this point, challenging his Baptist faith, he cultivated an interest towards other religions. Firstly he was fascinated by Judaism but, in his opinion, he was not welcome as he was black. In his words: "That religion seem to me like too much of racial pride and not for other people. It seems to

be all about ‘the Jews’ or Children of Israel”<sup>62</sup>. Consequently, he turned to Islam and started attending the Islamic Center of Nashville, where he was amazed by a congregational prayer named salah. Bledsoe claimed: “It was amazing to watch about 50 to 75 people bowing and prostrating in a synchronized way, so I attempted to join”<sup>63</sup>. Eventually, he converted to Islam and changed his name to a Muslim one, namely Abdulhakim Muhajid Muhammad. This identity transformation marked Bledsoe’s first sign of radicalization.

In 2007, after having become increasingly more observant, he decided to take a religious trip to Yemen. The experience there was “nothing less than transformative”<sup>64</sup>. Bledsoe had the chance to deepen his knowledge of Islamic law and Arabic in order to gain a better understanding of the Koran. In addition, he fell in love with a girl called Reena Abdullah Ahmed Farag which he married. Throughout his stay in Yemen Bledsoe had the opportunity to travel and expand his social networks. Whilst in Afghanistan, for example, he saw scenes which aroused and annoyed him. Amongst them, child refugees from the war and women which had been abused by American soldiers. His visit at a camp nearby the Saudi Arabian border also ought to be mentioned. In fact, it constitutes one of the most renowned cores of Al-Qaeda as well as an educational centre of modern Islam in which Salafism was taught.

Bledsoe’s locus of radicalization is constituted by the experience in Yemen’s maximum security prison, where he was jailed after having overstayed his visa. In that place he socialized with prisoners coming from various parts of the world, some of which had ties to Al-Qaeda. The latter continuously told Bledsoe that he had been betrayed by the American government and that they were his “real brothers”. The permanence in prison marked the passage from a mere radicalization from a cognitive point of view to the conviction of wanting to commit an act of political violence: launch a jihad against America. Thanks to the American Embassy in Yemen, Muhammad managed to return to the United States on January 29, 2009. Readjustment to his previous life proved very difficult, especially because he had developed a deep resentment towards American foreign policy and the military due to their ill-treatment of Muslims. This corresponds to the political grievance in Hamm and Spaaij’s model, which is to be matched to his already existing personal anger. His acquaintances, including a friend of his who encountered him at a mosque, did not notice any suspicious behaviour. The FBI, for its part, included Bledsoe in the government’s Terrorism Watch List. However,

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<sup>62</sup> Letter from Muhammad to Goetz, May 18, 2010; See also: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Lone Wolf Islamic Terrorism: Abdulhakim Muhajid Muhammad (Carlos Bledsoe) Case Study*, in “Terrorism and Political Violence”, n. 26, 2014, pp. 110-128;

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*; See also: Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 176;

<sup>64</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 177;



presumably not believing that the subject could pose a danger, he was not placed under observation. The FBI also did not detect as suspect Muhammad's desire for a Muslim burial and for all of his belongings to be distributed among the mosques in the city.

A couple of months after his return to America, Bledsoe moved to Little Rock in Arkansas as his parents had arranged him a job in the company's office there and consequently he settled into a new apartment. Carlos never openly talked about this phase of his life. Nonetheless, its understanding is essential as it is precisely in that apartment that he became an armed terrorist. Indeed, he started watching conspiracy videos on Youtube and strengthened his ties with the jihadists he had met in Yemen, thereby shrinking his broader social networks. As it is asserted by Hamm and Spaaij: "Alone and isolated in his apartment, he became a creature of his own criminality"<sup>65</sup>. After having heard on the news about an attack towards a synagogue in New York and on a military aircraft perpetrated by four ex-convicts of Islamist faith, Muhammad decided that the moment to plan his assault had arrived. He began searching for facilities and organizations that matched those targets nearby. As Bledsoe had not received any training by terrorist organizations, he was an inept criminal. In spite of that, he began to get organized by filling his home with an Islamic flag, Arabic CDs and a large amount of weapons. He even easily bought a firearm at Walmart, thus understanding that there were no obstacles to the realization of the attack.

Two further components of the radicalization model under consideration are the broadcasting intent and the triggering event. Regarding the former, nine days before carrying out the attack Bledsoe revealed his intentions to engage in terrorism on a martyrdom video to his wife. He was wearing Arab clothes and the assault rifle as well as the Islamic flag were clearly visible. Bledsoe motivated his attack by claiming that all Muslims have the obligation to counter-react against "Zionists, Crusaders and slaves of the Cross and for what happened in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Graib, Bagram prisons, what's going on in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine and elsewhere"<sup>66</sup>. The triggering event, instead, is represented by a news report informing that a group of American soldiers had deconsecrated a Koran by urinating on it. At this point, Bledsoe was ready to carry out attacks in the name of jihad. On June 1, 2009, he prepared all the necessary weaponry and proceeded towards the targets he had identified. The first three attempts to wage an attack resulted in a failure due to his poor familiarity with weapons. Consequently, emotionally frustrated, he headed back towards his apartment in Little Rock. However, during the journey, he was presented with an opportunity of crime which would have satisfied his political grievance: two soldiers at the entrance of the Army/Navy Recruiting Centre were smoking a cigarette during their break from work. The terrorist pulled over the car a few meters away

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, p. 181;

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Muhammad to Goetz, September 30, 2010; See also: Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 183;

from them, pointed the assault rifle in their direction and fired seven shots. One of the soldiers, William Long, died instantly in front of his mother's eyes. As for the other soldier Quinton Ezeagwula, injured he tried to shelter in the Recruiting Shelter but Bledsoe continued shooting. Once his weapon was empty, he fled away from the scene. Once arrested and jailed, Carlos revealed the motivation behind the attack, namely the unfair treatment of Muslims by army officials.

The last two elements that Hamm and Spaaij include in their account of lone wolf terrorists is their capacity to bring about copycat attacks as well as the presence of a mental illness in some of them. The news of the attack went viral, quickly spreading throughout America. Particularly influenced by the occurrence was Major Nidal Hasan, who was about to be transferred to Fort Hood, Texas for work. He strongly agreed with Bledsoe's idea of Muslims being poorly treated and objected to the presence of Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hasan was persuaded by Bledsoe's ideals to the point of buying a weapon which was then used to commit the well-known massacre at Fort Hood. It follows that Carlos Bledsoe is regarded as Hasan's indirect enabler. Returning to Bledsoe's experience, a few months after the attack, he filed a letter at a judge in which he declared himself responsible for several murders and fifteen acts of terrorist violence. He also revealed that he possessed ties with Al-Qaeda, reiterating that his sanity was intact. The psychiatrist which has been following the case offered a much less positive account of the terrorist's condition. Indeed, he claimed that the subject was afflicted by a delusional disorder when he realized the shooting. Moreover, he asserted that, as further corroborated by police investigations, Carlos had no whatsoever relationship with terrorist organizations. His presumed affiliation with Al-Qaeda, thus, was a mere invention, as was the event that provoked the attack, namely the alleged desecration of the Koran by American troops. In the psychiatrist's own words: "He clearly has a different version of reality than the rest of us"<sup>67</sup>. Although it is not known when Bledsoe started suffering from this disease, psychiatrists maintain that this disorder can manifest at an early age, oftentimes through bouts of anger and depression. This description perfectly matches the criminal's past experience, during which he had attempted to kill a woman following a car accident. The illness can also instil in the affected individual the conviction that he is responsible of carrying out a mission on behalf of society. In this case, Carlos acts in defence of all Muslims.

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<sup>67</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 187;

### 3.1.1: Further analysis of the case study

The reason I chose this specific case study is because, in addition to being applicable to the abovementioned model, it also highlights some important notions about the phenomenon of lone wolf Islamic terrorism more generally. First among them, the ability of religious ideology to trigger individual radicalization. In spite some scholars do not regard religion as a crucial factor to be accounted for in the move towards violence, Bledsoe's experience as well as that of other terrorists with similar motives, demonstrate the contrary<sup>68</sup>. Muhammad professed a version of Islam which can be identified as Salafi-Jihadi. The former indicates the desire of remodelling Islam in the way it used to be practiced by Prophet Muhammad and his followers, through the compliance to a rigorous methodology. The latter, instead, justifies violence as a potential mean to achieve this goal. In Bledsoe's view, a defensive jihad should be established. Every Muslim has the obligation to participate in the fight against western aggressors and defend the ummah, namely the worldwide community of believers.

Among the scholars who attach importance to the role of religion in their studies are Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt. In their well-known report, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat", they include a four-phase radicalization model in which religion assumes a prominent position<sup>69</sup>. The starting point of the radicalization process is constituted by the pre-radicalization phase, in which the individual comes into contact with the jihadi ideology for the first time. The authors demonstrated that the profiles in question had, in most instances, already been condemned for previous crimes or had experienced radicalization during their permanence in jail. The second step is the self-identification stage in which individuals, due to internal or external factors, experience the so called "cognitive opening". They can no longer find answers to existential questions in their cultures of reference and are keen to embrace new values. If one were to assess whether Bledsoe's instance reflects the steps in this model, the cognitive event could be represented by his arrest and prosecution in Knoxville, which led to his religious exploration. In the indoctrination phase the individual is ready to adopt the radical mindset and, thanks to the presence of a facilitator, understands that it is the right time for action. Once in Yemen, Bledsoe proceeded to this step. Lastly, in the jihadization phase, the individual starts believing that involvement in jihad is a moral duty and is prepared to organize and realize an attack.

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<sup>68</sup> Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop it*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010; Jessica Stern, *5 Myths About Who Becomes a Terrorist*, "Washington Post", January 10, 2010, available on: <https://today.law.harvard.edu/stern-in-the-washington-post-myths-about-terrorists/> (viewed on April 27, 2021);

<sup>69</sup> Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*, New York City Police Department, 2007;

### 3.2: Brenton Harrison Tarrant and the Christchurch terror attack

The second case study that I decided to examine is that of terrorist Brenton Harrison Tarrant, known for having conducted a massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand. The analysis is based upon a report realized by Boaz Ganor, a renowned Israeli expert on terrorism, in accordance with Israeli counterterrorism policy<sup>70</sup>. Through a detailed exposition of the terrorist's experience, the author reaches more general conclusions with regards to the factors that are often overlooked by counterterrorism agencies and bodies when evaluating attacks perpetrated by lone extremists. He also proposes a series of steps which should be undertaken in order to prevent future massacres of this sort.

The profile of this lone extremist is different from the previous one, as he is motivated by distinct ideology, namely an extreme right-wing racist one. Tarrant was born in Grafton, Australia, in a poor working class family. His parents divorced when he was only a child and his father died at the age of forty-nine. After his death, Brenton began travelling the world thanks to the money he inherited. This tour, especially his trip to France, was crucial as it matured in him the belief that Muslim immigrants threaten the white Anglo-Saxon and European culture. There are two decisive moments which encouraged him to bring about violent actions in the name of his conviction rather than merely opposing immigration from an ideological perspective. The first was an attack which took place in Stockholm in 2017 and caused the death of five individuals, among which an 11-year old Australian boy. In his own words: "I could no longer turn the other cheek to terror attacks perpetrated against my culture, religion and my soul"<sup>71</sup>. The second trigger is represented by Emmanuel Macron's election as Prime Minister in France, who possessed a too lenient attitude towards inward immigration. Tarrant is the author of a manifesto, titled 'The Great Replacement', which is structured in the form of a series of questions which he formulated and to which he answered. The latter provides an exploration into his worldview, motivations and grievances. In it, he openly admitted that he was a terrorist and exposed the two years of radicalisation which he undertook.

The terrorist radicalized solely through the Internet as, in his view, it constitutes the only reliable source of information. In fact, he consulted numerous websites and libraries which publish white supremacist materials. He was particularly influenced by Anders Breivik's writings, responsible for having realized a massacre towards a youth camp in the Norwegian island of Utoya in 2011, in which 77 people lost their lives and many were wounded. Moreover, he founded several right-wing extremist movements all around Europe. As the grievances towards the Muslim population intensified, Tarrant targeted two mosques during the Friday prayers, which were located 5 kilometres

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<sup>70</sup> Boaz Ganor, *Terrorism is Terrorism: The Christchurch terror attack from an Israeli counter-terrorism perspective*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020;

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6;

away from one another. He planned and executed the attacks thanks to the great aid of technology. Indeed, as he headed to the first mosque which he had identified, Al Noor, in a car filled with various types of legally purchased weapons and explosive devices, he played famous right-wing extremist music.

In addition, he started a Facebook live through a GoPro camera which he had placed on his helmet and claimed: “Let’s get this party started”<sup>72</sup>. Once Tarrant parked the car nearby the mosque, he started shooting indiscriminately at any worshipper who was passing by. One individual who attempted to stop him by taking the armament away from his hands was also killed. As his weapon was empty, Tarrant went back to his vehicle in order to load another ammunition and continued shooting at worshippers, making sure that no one remained alive. The police, for its part, was informed of the shooting twelve minutes after the attack had started being perpetrated. Tarrant had already caused the death of 42 individuals and was heading towards his second target, the Linwood Islamic Centre. There, he killed all bystanders which possessed Islamic features. As he was escaping from the scene, after having been chased by a worshipper, his vehicle was identified by the New Zealand Police and he was arrested.

Brenton Harrison Tarrant is considered a leading figure in the field of modern lone wolf terrorism because of the meticulous preparation of the attack and the masterful use of technology. Indeed, the Internet made available a wide variety of radical content, enabled the terrorist to disseminate his extremist message and inspired future generations of right-wing extremist warriors. Although Tarrant claimed in his manifesto that capturing the media’s attention and awareness was not his primary goal, he demonstrated a calculated use of these platforms. Suffice it to say that, in the minutes preceding the attack, he uploaded his manifesto in the most prominent social networks and in numerous websites, some of which are utilized by ISIS leaders as well. In order to make sure that enough individuals would download the manifesto and have easy access to it, he provided the necessary links and also proposed instructions on how to carry out such large scale massacres. The terrorist succeeded in his intent as the video was downloaded over 200 times on Facebook. Moreover, he was glorified by many supporters, before, during and after the attack. Despite Tarrant was not affiliated to a terrorist organization, he demonstrated that it was important for him to make known that he acted according to a clear historical message.

The manifesto also sheds lights on the terrorist’s tactical planning of the attack. In fact, Brenton spent three months searching and deciding the most suitable locations to carry out the attack.

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<sup>72</sup> Steve Hendrix and Michael E. Miller, *Let’s get this party started: New Zealand shooting suspect narrated his chilling rampage*, “The Washington Post”, March 16, 2019, available on: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/lets-get-this-party-started-new-zealand-gunman-narrated-his-chilling-rampage/2019/03/15/fb3db352-4748-11e9-90f0-0ccfeec87a61\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/lets-get-this-party-started-new-zealand-gunman-narrated-his-chilling-rampage/2019/03/15/fb3db352-4748-11e9-90f0-0ccfeec87a61_story.html) (viewed on April 28, 2021);

In his view, nowadays there are many favourable spots to carry out massacres. He revealed that in the beginning his intention was not that of targeting New Zealand. Nevertheless, the latter soon turned out as “a target rich of environment as anywhere else in the West”<sup>73</sup>. The execution of an attack there would have proven how dangerous the threat posed by Muslims immigrants is, having been able to reach a remote country such as New Zealand.

### **3.2.1: Shortcomings of law enforcement agencies and counterterrorism bodies in detecting attacks**

Tarrant’s extreme activism on the Internet and on social platforms did not raise any red flag or lead to the early detection of the Christchurch attack. The shortcomings that law enforcement agencies overlooked in this attack are those which would oftentimes prevent numerous terrorist attacks from being perpetrated. Therefore, it is worth to analyse them. First and foremost, up until New Zealand witnessed the attack, basic intelligence authorities did not perceive it as a location vulnerable to right-wing extremism and terrorism. One of the reasons for which they believed so is the low number of racist and Islamophobic events which occurred there in the past. Secondly, it is oftentimes difficult to detect potential terrorists earlier because of robust constitutional protections. In a society which grants free speech, numerous individuals openly reveal their opposition against immigration in favour of the preservation of their nationalistic cultural and religious characteristics. Nevertheless, it is only once they carry out violent activities that they can be outlawed. In order to prevent the ‘bad seeds’ like Tarrant from perpetrating massacres, cooperation and a community-wide effort are necessitated. Individuals must report any suspicious speech and behaviour to law enforcement authorities as for them to take the necessary measures. The Australian terrorist was very active on social network platforms and forums. Indeed, he uploaded pictures of his weaponry and on the Internet and financed numerous terrorist organizations. Law enforcement agencies were not aware of any of these actions. It follows that they should gain a higher control on individuals’ virtual networks.

Another rising problem which New Zealand shares with other countries is the extreme ease with which individuals are able to acquire weapons. Some nations possess a notably lenient policy over the purchase of weapons for various purposes. A further element which facilitates the commission of terrorist attacks is the low level of security covering in some places of worship, especially during prayers. The absence of security guards at the mosque gave Tarrant the opportunity to implement his plan without obstructions. Lastly, in this terrorist instance as well as in many others,

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<sup>73</sup> Boaz Ganor, *Terrorism is Terrorism: The Christchurch terror attack from an Israeli counter-terrorism perspective*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020, p. 11;

it is possible to notice a delay in the response of security forces. Although the police arrived at the site of the attack six minutes after having been notified, it lost the valuable time frame in between the moment in which the terrorist began his live on Facebook and when the attack was reported. If the New Zealand police had obtained the videos earlier, they could have grasped the terrorist's intention and eventually impede the attack.

### **3.2.2: Coordinating and preventing future lone wolves' attacks**

In view of all these deficiencies, renowned terrorism Israeli expert Boaz Ganor proposes a series of procedures to be undertaken in order to better coordinate or, when possible, even avoid future attacks or massacres, by lone wolves. Each country must be able to grant its citizenry maximum safety, through the implementation of appropriate laws and warranties. In the field of counterterrorism, the agencies which should be dealing with these tasks are the intelligence as well as the first-response systems. Regarding the social media intelligence, alert systems must be developed as to hinder the circulation of terror and hate materials. As stressed before, efforts must also be invested in strengthening the security measures within places of worship. The latter particularly attract lone wolf extremists as they are given the possibility to select their targets, namely worshippers of a particular religious group, thus reinforcing their message even more. It follows that government agencies or the community itself should make sure that these locations are monitored at all times. A suitable policy would be that of providing a balance between overt and covert security measures. For instance, the presence of fixed guards could be complemented by periodical checks by other security officials. Another efficient system would be that of tasking rapid response units, able to provide immediate aid to the victims. In addition, countries should revise their protocols with regards to the possession of guns. Individuals which are granted the right to acquire weaponry should receive appropriate training before being able to use them. Moreover, governments should regularly check licence holder's qualification. Tourists and non-residents should be prohibited from bringing weapons outside their home countries. Lastly, the number of guns and ammunitions available for sale should be reduced.

Ganor also suggests a deployment protocol to be put in place in the eventuality of an attack. This would enable to mobilize the diverse first-response elements in an efficient and organized way, by assigning each of them a specific task. Starting with the police and other enforcement elements, their role should be that of coordinating all other first-response elements. Moreover, they should avoid the perpetration of secondary attacks by immediately protecting the scene. In order to do so, they ought to locate explosive devices which terrorists might have stored somewhere. The police is also responsible of ensuring that public order is maintained. The job of the rescue and medical staff,

secondly, is that of granting first aid to wounded individuals, by taking them to the closest hospital facilities and making sure that they are treated properly. Lastly, intelligence agencies are tasked with the reconstruction of the dynamics of the attack, through the collection of tactical and forensic information. In the face of an attack, the abovementioned security and first-responders elements, together with political leaders, should be expected to disseminate unified messages to the civilians and restore a normal atmosphere as soon as possible. These messages may be an efficient medium in order to prevent future demonstrations and complaints in honour of the victims. In addition, the relatives of the victims should be offered assistance in order to recover from the traumatic experience of the attack. This may range from a professional help, in the case of those suffering from psychological disorders for instance, to aid in financial terms.

One last element to be mentioned which, especially in the case of attacks realized by lone wolves, oftentimes hinders their prevention, is the lack of a univocal and agreed definition of terrorism among nations, social media platforms and scholars. This may be problematic as Internet companies are forced to base their regulations on subjective criteria established by the US or UN, rather than on universally objective agreed ones. Regardless of the identity and motives of the perpetrator, its affiliation to a terrorist organization or whether the attack is conducted at a local level or internationally, any act of political violence should be considered as terrorism. A universal definition of the phenomenon would give the possibility to modify the somewhat lenient attitudes and narratives held towards some violent activities. Individuals must acknowledge that any intentional use of violence carried out by state organisation or individuals towards civilians for political purposes is never justified. Taking into consideration the case of Brenton Harrison Tarrant, although the subject himself as well as the New Zealand government identified him as a terrorist, some do not regard what happened in Christchurch as a terrorist attack. Their conviction is grounded on Bruce Hoffman's claim that: "In the past, a terrorist was mostly recognisable as someone committing violence at the direct behest or on behalf of some existent organisational entity or movement that had an identifiable chain of command"<sup>74</sup>. Nevertheless, this parameter has outlived its usefulness as the threat posed by lone wolf terrorists is on the rise. A definition of the phenomenon of terrorism is urgently required in order to ensure the presence of a global standard to measure violence activities and statements. Consequently, international counterterrorism agencies and bodies will be able to implement policies more effectively.

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<sup>74</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Back to the future: The return of violent far-right terrorism in the age of lone wolves*, "War on the Rocks", April 2, 2019, available on: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/back-to-the-future-the-return-of-violent-far-right-terrorism-in-the-age-of-lone-wolves/> (viewed on April 30, 2021).



### 3.3: Similarities between Islamist-Jihadist and Right-Wing Extremist ideologies

Having chosen two case studies motivated by two of the most common ideologies among lone wolf terrorists, Islamist-Jihadist, whose salient points have been explained through the experience of Carlos Bledsoe and Right-Wing extremist, examined through the instance of Brenton Harrison Tarrant, I wanted to propose a final analysis, emerged from Professor Boaz Ganor's report, of the similarities between the two on the basis of some common denominators:

- Altruism: Bledsoe identifies himself with the Muslim community as a whole. He acts on their behalf in order to protect the Islamic nation and faith. Similarly, Tarrant's objective is that of guarding white people, particularly Anglo-Americans, from the invasion of foreign immigrants;
- Defensive action: The underlying rationale behind the Little Rock military shooting was to defend the integrity of Islam holy sites and resources from colonialism on the part of Zionists and crusaders. In a likewise manner, Tarrant acts in defence of white people's race, lands and countries;
- Target: Bledsoe's reference group, Muslims, is opposed to that of the infidels to Islam. In Tarrant's case, Anglo-Americans are put in opposition to immigrant invaders;
- Modus Operandi: In both cases, the scope of the violent action perpetrated by the terrorists is to dissuade elements from behaving in a determinate in a certain way. Moreover, they both possess grievances towards their governments. Bledsoe protests against the injustice of American foreign policy. Tarrant, instead, believes that the policies adopted by French Prime Minister Macron on immigration are too lenient;
- Revenge: One of the triggers of Tarrant's attack is represented by the death of an eleven years old Australian boy in an attack motivated by Islamic ideology. Right wing extremists, more generally, seek revenge for the death of numerous Western citizens which were killed by jihadi warriors. Muslim terrorists, on similar terms, justify their attacks as a revenge against the death of Muslim citizens by the hands of extremists;
- Restoring old glory: Bledsoe's desire was that of restoring Islam to that which used to be practiced by Prophet Muhammad and his followers. Coupled with this, they would like to go back to the golden era in which they used to rule major parts of Europe and other countries as well. Tarrant's manifesto, by the same token, exposes his wish to reinstating the status quo ante, in which each individual lives in its native land;
- Call for action: Bledsoe adhered to a version of Islam according to which all Muslims should participate in the war against the West. Tarrant conveys the same message with regards to

white Anglo-Americans. His terrorist attack is aimed to generate anger and hostility in Western citizens against the Muslim enemies so as to pave the way for future military actions of this sort

- Sense of urgency: Both terrorists believe that urgent and imminent action should be taken in order to correct the injustices which they fought for;

## Conclusion

The relevance of the broader topic of terrorism and the continuous development of its different facets and techniques encouraged me to attend the sociology of terrorism course and triggered my interest in this multidimensional world. The idea to conclude my three-year bachelor's degree with a dissertation on the subject was, thus, born spontaneously.

Although research on the topic is still on the rise, my thesis aims at presenting an elaborate and detailed account of the lone wolf phenomenon, identifying the causes that determine it as well as the policies which counterterrorism bodies and agencies should undertake in order to confront with the issue. From this research we can draw conclusions that enrich this type of analysis as theory and practice have been combined in order to produce a report as complete as possible on lone actor extremists. Indeed, the theoretical investigation of the characteristics and psychological mechanisms of these individuals are seen at work in the exposition of two distinct instances of lone wolves. The latter have suggested that there are a series of factors which bond most lone extremists and encourage them to take action; nonetheless, they may possess different grievances and not all of them are mentally unstable, differently to what is commonly thought. A further rationale behind this dissertation was to assess the distinctive lines between terrorist organizations and lone wolves. As demonstrated by the analysis, these may not be so clear-cut. In fact, lone wolves often act on behalf of the motives of a particular terrorist organization. In addition, members of terrorist groups often radicalize through the same mediums employed by lone actors. The difference lies in the fact that the attack is realized collectively rather than by a single individual.

The moniker lone wolf particularly intrigued me. A superficial and perhaps hurried reading of the term would lead to identify lone actors with individuals who are unable to establish social bonds or relations with the surrounding environment. Nevertheless, as it is maintained by some of the authors mentioned in the research, this is not always the case. Indeed, despite some subjects engaging in the phenomenon act in total isolation, they keep in contact with other radicals and extremists through the Internet. The growing development of social media platforms and chatrooms which discuss violent content is, in fact, one of the factors contributing to the prominence of this phenomenon.

Another aspect that I observed throughout the writing of the dissertation is that there exists no single profile of lone wolf terrorist. In my opinion, it is precisely this aspect that makes the identification of these individuals difficult and consequently their massacres extremely hard to prevent. In fact, lone wolves may originate from a variety of diverse backgrounds, from a rich family

just as from a poor one. Nonetheless, at some point in their lives, they all manifest their first signs of radicalization. Often, however, the latter are not detected by security agencies and forces.

As emerged from an interview conducted with former terrorist Mubin Shaikh, engaging in acts of terrorism and, eventually becoming a famous terrorist, enables people to gain relevance in society and become heroes overnight. Consequently, in order to prevent the perpetration of attacks by lone wolves, efforts should be made in order to ensure the proper integration and well-being of all individuals, so that they do not seek visibility in other risky ways.

Lastly, I would like to point out that one of the reasons which drove me to carry out this analysis is that before attending the sociology of terrorism course I had mostly come across scholarly work dealing with terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, my research has corroborated that even massacres realized by individuals which do not receive any form of training in the field of terrorist organizations may be very lethal. It follows that major attention must also be devolved to this sort of attacks. I hope that this dissertation could constitute a good starting point for future research on the topic.

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## Sintesi

Questa tesi triennale si propone di analizzare il fenomeno dei lupi solitari nell'ambito degli studi sul processo di radicalizzazione e sul terrorismo. La ricerca si basa sull'approfondimento e la comparazione della letteratura esistente sul tema, la quale è infine applicata a esperienze pratiche di lupi solitari.

Il primo capitolo dell'elaborato si apre richiamando la rilevanza del fenomeno, considerando un'analisi comparativa condotta dallo studioso di terrorismo Alessandro Orsini. Egli dimostra che la maggior parte dei recenti attacchi terroristici islamici in Europa Occidentali avvenuti tra il 2015 e il 2020 sono stati compiuti sempre più da attori solitari piuttosto che da vere e proprie organizzazioni. Il fondamento logico dello studio consiste nella suddivisione degli attacchi dell'ISIS in tre categorie: quelli realizzati dai vertici dell'organizzazione, quelli portati avanti dai lupi solitari e quelli delle cellule autonome. Prendendo in esame dodici attacchi terroristici che hanno avuto luogo nel periodo in questione, lo studioso giunge alla conclusione che ben otto di questi sono stati realizzati da lupi solitari, in particolare da quelli che egli denomina "lupi solitari non addestrati". Questi, infatti, non ricevono alcuna formazione nei campi dell'ISIS. Essi dedicano la loro vita al raggiungimento di una causa per soddisfare un bisogno interiore e dare un significato alle loro vuote e tristi vite. Secondo Orsini, una variabile fondamentale da prendere in considerazione nella suddivisione degli attacchi terroristici è costituita dal livello di organizzazione del terrorista. Per questo egli afferma che, possedendo scarse risorse economiche e non essendo coordinati dai vertici dei gruppi terroristici, le aggressioni dei lupi solitari sono meno letali.

Sulla base di una delle opere più note sul tema, pubblicata recentemente dagli esperti di terrorismo Mark S. Hamm e Ramon Spaaij, viene successivamente proposta un'analisi sistematica dei lavori accademici sui lupi solitari. Gli autori si servono di un ampio database di tutti i casi noti di lupi solitari negli Stati Uniti tra il 1940 e la metà del 2016 e, combinando la teoria criminologica con la ricerca empirica ed etnografica, delineano in maniera specifica e dettagliata le caratteristiche e i processi di radicalizzazione di questi individui. Dall'opera traspare che non esiste una definizione univoca del fenomeno. Hamm e Spaaij privilegiano la componente "solitaria" della definizione, escludendo l'influenza diretta o il sostegno di terzi nella preparazione e realizzazione degli attacchi dei lupi solitari. Altri autori, invece, pongono l'accento sulla classificazione dei terroristi piuttosto che su una definizione rigorosa del fenomeno. Secondo la concezione di Christopher Hewitt, per esempio, un gruppo terroristico è costituito da un minimo di quattro individui. Ne consegue che anche le coppie e i trii sono considerati lupi solitari, il che comporta un'inflazione significativa nelle stime dell'incidenza di questo tipo di attacchi. Similmente, Paul Gill suddivide i lupi solitari in tre categorie,

sulla base del livello di influenza che subiscono da attori esterni. Infine, alcuni autori, quali Jonathan White e Brian Jenkins, rifiutano del tutto l'etichetta "terrorismo del lupo solitario", favorendo l'utilizzo di altre espressioni simili, come ad esempio "terrorismo solista" piuttosto che "terrorismo con un solo attore".

Il "Database dei Lupi Solitari Americani" creato da Hamm e Spaaij comprende 123 casi, tutti conformi alla definizione di lupo solitario proposta dai due autori. Le generalità di ogni episodio sono state raccolte mediante l'analisi di precedenti ricerche, biografie, rapporti governativi, documenti giudiziari con denunce penali e valutazioni psichiatriche. Il database permette di confrontare i lupi solitari che hanno operato negli Stati Uniti prima dell'11 Settembre 2001 con le loro controparti che hanno operato nell'epoca successiva, sulla base di alcuni indicatori: il cambiamento nel *modus operandi* di questi individui nel corso del tempo, le loro analogie e differenze con le organizzazioni terroristiche e i loro più frequenti luoghi di radicalizzazione. Dall'analisi emerge che i lupi solitari attivi tra il 1940 e il 2000 sono stati autori di 173 attacchi, causando la morte di 100 individui e ferendone altri 305. Le loro controparti, invece, hanno portato a termine meno massacri, rispettivamente 147, ma il numero di morti e feriti è stato superiore, 340 in totale. Mentre i primi hanno fatto uso principalmente di bombe prodotte in casa e armi da fuoco, i secondi hanno beneficiato di un arsenale di armi maggiore, che comprendeva dei piccoli aeromobili, delle armi biologiche, dei coltelli e delle attrezzature da costruzione.

Per quanto riguarda gli obiettivi a cui rivolgere gli attacchi, in entrambi i periodi sono stati particolarmente presi di mira i leader politici. Tuttavia, la nuova generazione di lupi solitari ha attaccato anche basi e installazioni militari. Questi estremisti decentralizzati mettono in discussione la validità dello Stato. A tal fine, hanno preso di mira i pilastri delle autorità statali nelle società occidentali, identificati negli agenti di polizia e nei soldati. In un terzo dei casi in esame, Hamm e Spaaij hanno riscontrato anche *l'effetto copycat*, ossia la tendenza delle piattaforme mediatiche di riprodurre i fatti di cronaca nera in una maniera che seduce la futura perpetrazione di attacchi simili da parte di individui con inclinazioni violente. Le analogie e le differenze tra le organizzazioni terroristiche e i lupi solitari sono state individuate mediante l'analisi di alcune variabili. Prima fra queste, l'età dei terroristi. Lo studio dimostra che, al momento del loro complotto, gli attori solitari sono più anziani rispetto a quelli che appartengono alle organizzazioni terroristiche. Questo fattore potrebbe essere spiegato dalla differenza nel processo di radicalizzazione a cui vengono sottoposti. Dato che i lupi solitari adottano l'ideologia radicale autonomamente e non a seguito della pressione di un gruppo, tale interiorizzazione può richiedere più tempo.

Passando ad esaminare l'educazione di militanti, è emerso che i lupi solitari ricevono un livello di educazione inferiore rispetto alle loro controparti. Infatti, il profilo standard di un lupo

solitario americano è quello di un uomo disoccupato, non sposato e con precedenti penali. I jihadisti analizzati negli studi di Marc Sageman, invece, risultano essere sposati con figli e impiegati come funzionari statali o professionisti. L'ultima variabile presa in considerazione nella distinzione tra le due categorie di terroristi riguarda la loro sanità mentale. Nella maggior parte dei soggetti presenti nel database è stato diagnosticato un disturbo psicologico, quale la schizofrenia o la bipolarità. Al contrario, i membri dei gruppi jihadisti nello studio di Sageman e Bakker non mostrano alcuna malattia mentale apparente. I risultati sopra descritti suggeriscono che il malessere dei lupi solitari ha origine dalla percezione di essere privati dei beni e dello status sociale a cui avrebbero diritto, nata in seguito al confronto con ciò che possiedono gli altri individui che li circondano.

Nella loro opera, Hamm e Spaaij provvedono anche a descrivere i più frequenti luoghi di radicalizzazione dei lupi solitari e come questi sono variati nel corso del tempo. Nel periodo precedente all'11 Settembre 2001, il più frequente vettore di radicalizzazione era rappresentato dal gruppo estremista di cui il lupo solitario era in precedenza membro. Tuttavia, dato il progressivo sviluppo della tecnologia, questa tendenza è diminuita ed è stata rimpiazzata dall'affinità con una comunità virtuale di estremisti. Infatti, oggi esiste la possibilità di radicalizzarsi attraverso la comunicazione con amici su piattaforme sociali e la consultazione di manuali online consente di acquisire le competenze tecniche necessarie per effettuare atti terroristici da qualsiasi località in cui il lupo solitario si trovi. Il servizio militare, così come la permanenza in prigione, costituiscono luoghi di radicalizzazione più stabili nel tempo. In ultimo, la radicalizzazione può avvenire all'interno della propria famiglia, tramite la trasmissione dell'ideologia estremista da una generazione all'altra.

Nel creare il loro "Modello di Radicalizzazione dei Lupi Solitari", che viene esposto alla fine del primo capitolo, Hamm e Spaaij tengono conto di altre tre componenti importanti che entrano in gioco nel processo di radicalizzazione di questi individui. La prima è la presenza di un cosiddetto *enabler*, che è rappresentato da un individuo che fisicamente assiste il lupo solitario, oppure si può trattare della figura di un eroe o un martire a cui il terrorista si ispira nel condurre il suo attacco. Sebbene questi autori sostengano che i terroristi appartenenti alla categoria in questione non interagiscano fisicamente con l'ambiente circostante, potrebbero comunque rivelare apertamente i loro disagi e la conseguente intenzione di realizzare un atto di violenza tramite un video, un manifesto oppure delle affermazioni minacciose. Questo elemento è denominato *broadcasting intent*. L'ultimo stadio del processo di radicalizzazione è costituito da una o più cause scatenanti, che instillano nel terrorista la convinzione di ricorrere alla violenza. Le componenti sopra descritte non si succedono in maniera lineare nel modello. Infatti, per diventare un lupo solitario, un individuo non deve necessariamente passare attraverso ogni singola fase, ma può saltare alcune fasi e finalizzare il suo percorso verso il terrorismo in un lasso di tempo piuttosto breve.

Il secondo capitolo dell'elaborato presenta i processi psicologici alla base del terrorismo dei lupi solitari, in accordo con le teorie degli studiosi Clark McCauley e Sophia Moskalkenko. Inizialmente sono descritti i sei meccanismi di radicalizzazione individuale, esposti dagli autori nell'opera 'Friction'. Il primo meccanismo è il *risentimento personale* ed ha luogo quando un individuo percepisce di aver subito un torto e vuole ottenere giustizia o vendetta per quest'ultimo. Il lupo solitario può serbare odio o rancore solo verso la persona responsabile dell'ingiustizia, ma talvolta il risentimento può estendersi anche verso l'intera categoria sociale a cui egli appartiene. Il secondo meccanismo, definito *risentimento di gruppo*, avviene invece quando un individuo si radicalizza in seguito ad ingiustizie subite da un gruppo verso cui prova empatia. Il terzo meccanismo, lo *slippery slope*, tradotto come *pendio scivoloso*, consiste in una radicalizzazione graduale e, in una certa misura, involontaria. L'individuo, infatti, non ha alcuna intenzione di portare avanti atti violenti ma si trova coinvolto in una serie di situazioni che lo spingono a radicalizzarsi. Anche l'*amore* verso un partner, un amico o un familiare può condurre verso il terrorismo. Infatti, man mano che la coesione di gruppo aumenta grazie all'identificazione di obiettivi e minacce comuni, diventa progressivamente più difficile per il singolo abbandonare l'organizzazione terroristica.

Il quinto meccanismo è caratterizzato dall'*amore per il rischio o per il perseguimento del prestigio sociale*. Questo tipo di percorso è prevalente tra gli individui appartenenti alle classi sociali più basse e con scarse prospettive di istruzione o lavorative, che mirano perciò a diventare famosi terroristi. L'ultimo meccanismo è denominato *scongelo*. Questo avviene quando un individuo subisce un cambiamento repentino della realtà in cui era stato immerso fino a quel momento, a causa di una guerra civile o dell'emigrazione verso un nuovo paese. Offrendo compagnia e protezione, nonché un'ideologia che infonde senso e ordine a una vita invece sconclusionata, le organizzazioni terroristiche possono offrire conforto a questi individui. McCauley e Moskalkenko concludono che la presenza di un solo meccanismo di quelli appena descritti non è sufficiente a innescare compiutamente un processo di radicalizzazione. Inoltre, essi sminuiscono il ruolo dell'ideologia come fattore di radicalizzazione.

McCauley e Moskalkenko tentano di rispondere a due ulteriori quesiti relazionati alla psicologia, apparentemente irrazionale, dei lupi solitari: perché questi individui dovrebbero sacrificarsi, a volte lasciando indietro i loro cari, per rivendicare un torto fatto ad una persona a loro estranea? Perché un individuo dovrebbe sacrificare qualcosa per un bene pubblico, che potrebbe essere l'uguaglianza, la giustizia o la libertà, fornendo profitti anche a terze parti? La prima risposta che viene fornita consiste in un approccio noto nell'ambito della psicologia evoluzionista come *forte reciprocità*. Questo presuppone che la cooperazione tra gli esseri umani può portare a dei vantaggi. Tuttavia, i benefici della cooperazione possono essere sfruttati dai cosiddetti *free-riders*, i quali

godono dei frutti della collaborazione senza parteciparne minimamente. Ne consegue che la crescente presenza di parassiti nel sistema danneggerebbe coloro che sono altruisti per natura. La soluzione a questo problema è il riconoscimento che l'altruismo può portare profitti solo quando gli individui, anche quelli che non hanno sperimentato direttamente la violazione, sono disposti a punire i disertori. I lupi solitari, infatti, sono disposti a pagare personalmente il prezzo di comportamenti altrui.

Una seconda spiegazione per cui i lupi solitari decidono di sacrificarsi per gli altri è costituita dalla loro capacità di identificarsi con un gruppo. Questo meccanismo può avvenire in due direzioni. L'identificazione positiva, quando un individuo prova gratificazione nella prosperazione economica dell'altro e al contempo prova malessere se un altro individuo sta attraversando un momento difficile. L'identificazione negativa, invece, è il meccanismo opposto: appagamento quando il prossimo è in difficoltà e malcontento quando il prossimo fiorisce. L'identificazione positiva può coinvolgere anche individui o gruppi che non fanno parte della propria cerchia di conoscenze e che risultano quindi a loro sconosciuti. Anche se il proprio benessere materiale non viene aumentato prendendosi cura di questi individui, viene investita una grande quantità di risorse materiali ed emotive per loro. L'identificazione con un gruppo che è considerato vittimizzato suscita un sentimento di rabbia e animosità verso coloro che sono responsabili verso la loro vittimizzazione. Il sostegno a coloro che soffrono e l'inflizione di danni ai perpetratori sono gratificanti e offrono incentivi per compiere un attacco. La forte capacità di empatia dei lupi solitari nei confronti delle loro vittime infonde in loro il dovere morale di agire.

L'ultima sezione di questo capitolo è provocatoria, in quanto costituisce una critica al pensiero di McCauley e Moskaleiko e alla comune concezione dei lupi solitari, sollecitando la necessità di ridefinire il fenomeno. Gli autori mettono in discussione la presunta "solitudine" di questi individui, portando avanti due prove a sostegno della loro tesi. La prima di queste riguarda la presenza di relazioni sociali con l'ambiente circostante durante tutto il processo di radicalizzazione, dalla condivisione di un'ideologia radicale, alla preparazione di attacchi terroristici. I lupi solitari, infatti, necessitano dell'interazione con ambienti radicali, che sia faccia a faccia o attraverso piattaforme online. Uno studio condotto da Schuurman, Bakker, Bouhana e Gill, ha dimostrato che una gran parte dei lupi solitari ha beneficiato di assistenza da parte di terzi nella fornitura delle armi e dei materiali necessari per l'attacco. Ne consegue che l'etichetta "lupo solitario" sovrastima il grado di solitudine di questi individui, in quanto essi sono effettivamente soli esclusivamente durante la commissione dell'attacco. La seconda credenza comune che i critici intendono sfatare è quella secondo cui i lupi solitari sono altamente cauti nella pianificazione dei loro assalti. In realtà lo studio conferma che molti di loro mettono a repentaglio la sicurezza del loro attacco, trascurando alcune misure, quali l'utilizzo del loro vero nome durante l'attacco piuttosto che quello di uno pseudonimo. Avendo

dimostrato che i lupi solitari sono influenzati da personalità esterne e dall'ambiente circostante, le dinamiche di questi individui potrebbero non essere troppo differenti da quelle che si succedono negli altri tipi di massacri. Di conseguenza, potrebbe non essere necessario classificare i lupi solitari come una distinta tipologia di terrorismo. In ultimo, il riconoscimento della presenza di questi legami esterni consentirebbe a coloro che si occupano di smascherare i lupi solitari di perseguirli tramite la loro rete sociale più ampia.

Il terzo capitolo dell'elaborato illustra due istanze pratiche di lupi solitari, tramite l'applicazione dei modelli teorici spiegati nei capitoli precedenti. La prima riguarda l'esperienza di Carlos Leon Bledsoe, il terrorista che ha realizzato la sparatoria militare a Little Rock il 9 Maggio 2009. La seconda, invece, espone l'attacco terroristico avvenuto a Christchurch il 15 Marzo 2019, per mano di Brenton Harrison Tarrant, tramite un rapporto condotto da Boaz Ganor, un noto esperto di terrorismo israeliano. I casi studio selezionati sono rappresentativi di due delle ideologie più comuni tra i lupi solitari, quella Islamista-Jihadista sostenuta da Bledsoe e quella di estrema destra portata avanti da Tarrant. Queste due vicende sono legate da alcuni indicatori comuni, i quali sono spesso presenti negli attacchi dei lupi solitari. Primo fra tutti, l'*altruismo*. Bledsoe si identifica con la comunità musulmana nel suo insieme. Agisce per loro conto al fine di proteggere la nazione islamica e la fede. Allo stesso modo, l'obiettivo di Tarrant è quello di proteggere i bianchi, in particolare gli anglo-americani, dall'invasione di immigrati stranieri.

In secondo luogo, entrambi compiono un'*azione difensiva*. La logica alla base della sparatoria di Little Rock era di difendere l'integrità dei luoghi sacri e delle risorse dell'Islam dal colonialismo da parte dei sionisti e dei crociati. In maniera analoga, Tarrant agisce a difesa della razza bianca, delle loro terre e dei loro paesi. Per quanto riguarda il *target* a cui si rivolge l'attacco, il gruppo di riferimento di Bledsoe, costituito dai musulmani, si oppone a quello degli infedeli alla religione musulmana; nel caso di Tarrant, gli anglo-americani sono messi in opposizione agli invasori immigrati. Un'ulteriore somiglianza tra i due riguarda il loro *modus operandi*: in entrambi i casi lo scopo dell'azione violenta dei terroristi è quello di dissuadere alcuni individui dal comportarsi in una determinata maniera. Inoltre, entrambi si lamentano dei loro rispettivi governi. Il terrorista jihadista protesta contro l'ingiustizia della politica estera americana; quello di estrema destra, invece, ritiene che le politiche adottate dal primo ministro francese Macron sull'immigrazione siano troppo indulgenti. La *vendetta* è un altro elemento che accomuna Tarrant e Bledsoe. Uno dei fattori scatenanti dell'attacco del primo, infatti, è rappresentato dalla morte di un ragazzo australiano di undici anni in un attacco di matrice islamica. Gli estremisti di destra, più in generale, rivendicano la morte di numerosi cittadini occidentali uccisi dai guerrieri jihadisti. I terroristi musulmani, dal canto loro, giustificano i loro attacchi come una vendetta contro la morte di cittadini musulmani per mano

di estremisti. Inoltre, il desiderio di entrambi era quello di *ripristinare uno status quo*. Carlos desiderava tornare all'islam che era praticato dal profeta Maometto e i suoi seguaci. Insieme a questo, vorrebbero tornare all'epoca d'oro in cui governavano grandi parti dell'Europa e degli altri paesi. Il manifesto di Tarrant, allo stesso modo, espone il suo desiderio di ritornare al momento in cui ciascun individuo viveva nella sua terra natale. Bledsoe aderisce ad una versione dell'islam secondo la quale tutti i musulmani devono prendere parte alla guerra contro l'Occidente. Tarrant trasmette lo stesso messaggio agli anglo-sassoni bianchi. Il suo attacco terroristico è volto a generare rabbia e ostilità nei cittadini musulmani in modo da spianare la strada per future azioni militari di questo tipo. In ultimo, entrambi i terroristi trasmettono un *senso di urgenza*. Infatti, ritengono che sia necessario intraprendere azioni imminenti per fronteggiare le ingiustizie per cui stanno combattendo.

In seguito ai crescenti attacchi da parte di lupi solitari, Boaz Ganor propone delle procedure da intraprendere al fine di coordinare meglio o, quando possibile, evitare futuri attacchi o massacri da parte dei lupi solitari, in conformità con la politica di antiterrorismo adottata in Israele. In primo luogo, il continuo sviluppo della tecnologia rende necessaria la creazione di sistemi di allarme che impediscano la circolazione di materiale di carattere estremista o radicale. Le forze dell'ordine, inoltre, dovrebbero ottenere un maggiore controllo sulle reti virtuali individuali. Infatti, molti terroristi sono estremamente attivi sulle piattaforme social, pubblicando fotografie delle loro armi o finanziando organizzazioni terroristiche, senza essere identificati dai servizi di sicurezza. Un altro problema crescente è la facilità con cui gli individui riescono ad entrare in possesso di armi. Alcuni paesi possiedono una politica particolarmente indulgente sull'acquisto di armamenti. Gli individui a cui è concesso il diritto di acquistare armi dovrebbero ricevere una formazione adeguata prima di poterle utilizzare. Inoltre, i governi dovrebbero controllare regolarmente la qualifica del titolare della licenza. Infine, il trasferimento di armi da un paese all'altro dovrebbe essere vietato, così come dovrebbe essere ridotto il numero di armi e munizioni disponibile per la vendita.

Un'ultima problematica che Ganor intende fronteggiare è il basso livello di sicurezza a cui sono sottoposti i luoghi di culto. L'esperto suggerisce che la presenza di guardie fisse in quegli spazi dovrebbe essere completata da controlli periodici da parte di altri funzionari di sicurezza. Successivamente, nell'eventualità di un attacco dovrebbe anche essere messo in atto un protocollo, in modo da mobilitare i diversi elementi di primo soccorso in maniera efficiente. La polizia ha il ruolo di mantenere l'ordine pubblico ed evitare la perpetrazione di attacchi secondari proteggendo la scena. Il personale sanitario deve fornire primo soccorso agli individui feriti, trasferendoli nelle strutture ospedaliere meno distanti. Le agenzie di intelligence hanno il compito di ricostruire le dinamiche dell'attacco attraverso la raccolta di informazioni tattiche e forensi. In ultimo, i membri del governo



sono tenuti a diffondere messaggi ai civili e a ripristinare un'atmosfera normale nel minor tempo possibile.

Sebbene la ricerca sull'argomento sia ancora in evoluzione, il mio studio mirava a presentare un resoconto elaborato e dettagliato sul fenomeno dei lupi solitari, individuando le cause che lo determinano e le politiche che le organizzazioni di antiterrorismo dovrebbero intraprendere per affrontare la questione. In questa ricerca l'indagine teorica e quella pratica sono state combinate, al fine di produrre un rapporto più completo possibile. Infatti, le caratteristiche e i meccanismi psicologici di questi individui sono stati visti all'opera nell'esposizione di due casi pratici di lupi solitari. Questi ultimi hanno dimostrato che esistono una serie di fattori che legano la maggior parte degli autori solitari e li spingono ad agire. Tuttavia, a causa delle diverse sfaccettature del fenomeno, non è ancora possibile individuare un profilo singolo di questa tipologia di terrorista. Un altro scopo dell'analisi era quello di valutare le linee distintive tra le organizzazioni terroristiche e i lupi solitari, le quali, come confermato dalla ricerca, potrebbero non essere così nette. Una lettura superficiale e forse affrettata del termine "lupo solitario" indurrebbe, infatti, al pensiero che questi individui non siano in grado di impegnarsi in relazioni con l'ambiente circostante. Ciononostante, alcuni autori hanno dimostrato che i lupi solitari sono in contatto con altri radicali ed estremisti mediante piattaforme online e, inoltre, si radicalizzano tramite gli stessi vettori. La differenza risiede nel fatto che nel caso dei lupi solitari l'attacco è portato avanti da un singolo individuo piuttosto che da un'intera organizzazione.

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